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Legitimizing Violence at the European Border: Gendered Misrepresentations at Sea and the Vulnerable Other

Michela Demelas
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

LEGITIMIZING VIOLENCE AT THE EUROPEAN BORDER:

GENDERED MISREPRESENTATIONS AT SEA AND THE VULNERABLE OTHER

by

MICHELA DEMELAS

A Master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial

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Date

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Dána-Ain Davis

Thesis Advisor

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Date

_____

Dána-Ain Davis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT
Legitimizing Violence at the European Border:

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by

Michela Demelas

Advisor: Dana Davis

This thesis highlights a temporal and spatial gap in the feminist literature about migrants' journeys throughout the Mediterranean, and investigates the gendered dynamics acting upon the encounter between the European border and racialized bodies at sea. The Mediterranean sea's material features allow Europe to approach migration as a humanitarian *crisis* coming from outside, which discharges its responsibility for the deaths. Yet, essentialistic views represent the feminized Other as vulnerable and needing to be saved from the male Other and the sea. Such views shape the Western narratives around concrete rescue procedures and border authorities behaviors. The encounter between the border and racialized bodies legitimizes, therefore, the perpetuation of the border's masculine enforcement. It guarantees the integrity of the European subject's identity as a warrior against the savage man and a good savior of the vulnerable, both epistemologically and materially. I identify this gap to open a new horizon of possibilities to challenge the European masculine violence at the border. I suggest that further investigation should begin from an epistemological criticism to gendered mainstream narratives about migrants at sea. Visibilizing women's stories in the Mediterranean could bring to a new awareness about the dangers they face. In reality, gendered dangers for women at sea are connected to the structural injustice of the border that is epistemologically hidden behind the sea by the state. Thus, moving the focus to the sea could begin to dismantle the deadly wall in which Europe has transformed the sea.

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SECTION 1
INTRODUCTION[1]

As the morning ferry from Piraeus approaches, Lesvos emerges receptive and tranquil
from the crystalline Aegean waters. (Tsoni, 2016, p. 36)

In 2019, Giorgia Linardi[2] was invited by *L'Assedio*, an Italian television broadcast, to

talk about her work at sea. On that occasion, she decided to show the audience a picture of a

woman's dead body floating in the water. "The Mediterranean sea is this" (*L'Assedio,* 2019,

1:08), she says, "we need to understand what is happening" (0:27). Besides the questionability

of the act of instrumentalizing this woman's picture,[3] it is interesting to reflect on Linardi's

choice of showing a woman, and not a man, to represent the Mediterranean sea as the violence of

European border and provoke people's reaction.

Forgotten and killed by the *catastrophe*[4] at sea; women[5] have been massively crossing

the Mediterranean on partially deflated, low-quality, rickety boats in very unsafe conditions. Yet,

along with the epistemological construction of the alleged[6] *refugee crisis* happening for

European countries, the public debate about people arriving in Europe by boat has turned out to

be a gendered misrepresentation. Among the *false myths* in the common imaginary about

migrants at sea, the fact that boats are typically imagined as full of young and able men

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[1] Sporadic translations to English have been made by the author.
[2] Giorgia Linardi is an Italian jurist working in the context of human rights, conflict, and migration. She is the current Legal Adviser and Mission Coordinator for External Relations of the Sea Watch (SW), a German NGO that rescues migrants in the Mediterranean sea.
[3] Linardi herself says: "Honestly, I feel like I am being disrespectful" (*L'Assedio*, 2019, 0:25) for instrumentalizing the picture of the woman to provoke the audience's reaction and raising awareness about the migrants' cause.
[4] I am using *catastrophe* as Roberto Barrios (2017) defines it. According to him, the term is used "to convey the nonanthropological understanding of disaster as an isolated event that begins with the manifestation of a hazard, that cannot be prevented, and that occurs as an anomaly unrelated to the quotidian order of things" (p. 155).
[5] I voluntarily decided not to use the labels of *refugee* and *asylum-seeker* except for the cases in which I quote an author that uses them or I refer to the framework of the *refugee crisis* as Europe has elaborated it. I use instead the words *people*, *women*, *men, children, older people*. I also use *racialized bodies* to indicate how people are perceived by the body politic, *arrivals* to refer to landings, *migrants* to highlight that people are on the move, and *passengers* to talk about people onboard boats.
[6] I use "alleged" because, as I argue later, the term crisis has been used by institutions and the public discourses to refer to the increasing numbers of arrivals in the European continent as a functional epistemological framework.

(Binkowski, 2016) has helped nationalist narratives depicting migrants as strong warriors fearlessly navigating the lethal obstacle of the sea and coming through its uncontrollable waves to invade the body politic's territory. These narratives long provided justifications for the state's masculine approach to migrants' subjugation and national security and, consequently, a process of border genderization. Along with the masculinization of border enforcement procedures aimed at Europe's protection, the state impersonates the male warrior fighting against the bad man to protect his nation[7] (I. Young, 2003) but remains good and compassionate toward the helpless (Ahmed, 2015). Migrant women enter therefore hegemonic narratives as the vulnerable Other waiting to be saved from their men (Spivak, 2988) and, I argue, the hardship of the sea.

Once they are in the liminal moment/place of the border at sea, racialized bodies enter into the *bareness of life* (Butler, 2003) and their identities get unmade and re-made in the indefiniteness of the waves. "She is a gorgeous woman, floating in the water [...]. But we will never know what her name was, where she was from, why she was there" (0:50) Linardi says.

During my experience as a land emergency response volunteer in Lesvos,[8] I observed how my relationship with the sea was changing. I grew up on an Italian island and spent my whole childhood surrounded by it. My memories are soaked with salty water, which has long been a symbol of liberation and relief for my soul. My time in Lesvos has changed something. After spending years of my life away from it, I had come back to the same water I had seen as a

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[7] Women do not have any subjectivity inside the subject's community, which is why I refer to the state, the body politic, and the Western subject as masculine. According to Iris M. Young (2003), when the household is threatened "there cannot be divided wills" (p. 4) and "the woman concedes critical distance from decision-making autonomy" (p. 4). The extent to which the masculine leader approaches politics through a gendered lens effectively legitimizes him to create a muscular security state towards the outside but also expects unity of purposes inside.

[8] Lesvos is a Greek island located in the Aegean Sea. Its shores are only a few kilometers far from the Turkish shore, which is why most migrants trying to reach Europe from Turkey transit from there. In Lesvos, I volunteered twice in the emergency response team of Lighthouse Relief (LHR), an NGO based in the North shore of the island, assisting people crossing the sea by spotting the boats and helping them as they land.

sweet floating nest where I could hide from the chaotic rhythm of the capitalistic and progressive

society. But there, in the midst of waves, I found extreme danger, despair, and injustice instead.

On the North shore of Lesvos, while watching the horizon with our binoculars to identify

potential boats of migrants looking for help, my fellow volunteers and I could daily see

numerous ferries, cargoes, pleasure boats, and fishing boats. These vessels safely sail through the

narrow strait of sea dividing the Greek island from Turkey. Both at nighttime and daytime, while

looking at these kinds of vessels from above, that vast mass of water looked quiet, and I could

imagine every passenger onboard these kinds of vessels surviving it, even newborn children.

However, in the very same narrow and busy strait, hundreds of migrants have died. The

people my fellow volunteers and I assisted disembarking mostly approached the shore screaming

and crying, and clearly could not wait to put their feet on the ground. Seen up close, indeed, the

same homogeneous mass of water would appear as a gigantic monster compared to the small,

deflated, and overcrowded dinghies which migrants use to travel. Waves could get extremely

high, which could make crossing deadly. In fact, smugglers tell the driver to go toward rocky and

isolated areas to ensure that people are not intercepted and sent back to Turkey.[9]

Being intercepted at sea could mean, in fact, that the boat could have been pulled-back[10]

by Turkish authorities, who usually attacked migrants' boats to scare passengers and make it

impossible for them to go forward. Even though push-backs by Greek authorities were much less

frequent during the time I was there, they and Frontex[11] were not gentle with people either.

Usually, after volunteers helped with the landing, European authorities would arrive on the

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[9] The journey at sea is usually organized by a smuggler. Each person getting onboard pays them a large sum, and the smugglers illegally arrange a boat by which a consistent group of people will make the crossing.
[10] I define 'pull-backs' as the Turkish authorities' illegal behavior of entering Greek waters to bring migrants back to Turkey. I use 'push-back' when Greek authorities intercept migrants at sea and push them back to Turkey.
[11] Frontex is the *European Border and Coast Guard Agency* in charge of patrolling the borders of the European Schengen Area along with Member States' authorities.

scene, make freezing and wet women and children sit aside, and aggressively interrogate the men asking who the driver was, searching them, demanding papers, and screaming to frighten them. Even those officers (some of whom were women) who seemed to be quiet when there was no operation, would turn out to be violent and masculine in front of their male colleagues and a migrant man.

When no additional issues with the boat occurred, such as engines getting broken, I often felt that people would have dealt with landing by themselves. The strongest women and men among passengers would often help older adults, injured people, and small children to walk toward safer spots to rest and wait for someone to show up. Most of the time, we volunteers were just extra hands. However, I did feel we had a fundamental role in alleviating people's first experience of Europe. Sitting close to them, we would say *Khosh Amadid/Marheba/Bienvenue* (welcome) and few other words in a low tone and soothing voice, and distract them from authorities' 'border procedures' and aggressiveness.

This paper originates from my memories. Due to my privileged positionality of being a White European who has all her papers in order, it is not my prerogative to interpret the fears, the wishes, or the thoughts of the people I met in Lesvos. However, their reactions and their gazes after crossing, along with authorities' behaviors, remain with me. They have raised plenty of questions: how does coloniality materialize both the normalized privilege of taking a ferry from Lesvos to Turkey with all the papers in order and the violence of crossing the European border in the opposite direction without papers in the very same narrow strait? Why were procedures at the border so rigid about gender and why did it seem compulsory for the authorities to perform masculine roles during emergency situations? Why were women onboard depicted as the victims of smugglers and helpless at sea but men were often accused to be the smuggler while the

average passenger, regardless of their gender, race, nationality, seemed to be similarly scared but determined to move? What was the meaning behind authorities' behavior based on normalized gendered misrepresentations in the specific moment of rescue? How did these gendered factors shape the imaginary around sea water in my mind? And, ultimately, how did they influence people's embodied experiences at sea?

Feminists have long focused on migration and have joined the scholars of critical border studies in criticizing the gendered dynamics of exclusion at play at the borderland. However, little attention has been given to the role that the sea has played in the epistemological legitimization of the gendered enforcement of the border; its violence on racialized and gendered bodies; and the way the body politic totalizes their experience of the specific liminal time/space of crossing. Through the border, indeed, the state unmakes and re-makes their identities according to his preconceived hegemonic narratives about them (Brambilla, 2015). But at sea, hegemonic narratives, the gendered material performances of these narratives by authorities, and the gendered impacts on racialized bodies and people's identities are still unexplored. Exploring what happens in the indefinite area of the Mediterranean where bodies move between the time and space in the non-Western world *before* Europe and *here* in Europe (Sinke, 2006) from a gender perspective could open new paths toward the epistemological delegitimization and deconstruction of mainstream narratives, and the visibilization of embodied experiences at the border.

Building upon the plea of Suzanne Sinke (2006) to analyze migration as a movement and not a settlement, I identify in the specific liminal moment of crossing the border at sea a geographical and temporal gap in the feminist epistemology about migrants' journey to Europe. Filling this gap has the potential of exploring the interlocking and dialectic relationship between

gendered and racialized hegemonic narratives linked to the European colonial heritage. Therefore, it could also open a new horizon to investigate epistemological constructs about the European subject's identity in relation to the Other; the border enforcement for securitization and sovereignty reasons; the geographical connotations of the *natural* border that the Mediterranean sea represents; and the gendered repercussions on migrants' identities and experiences of the crossing.

I conduct an interdisciplinary analysis including feminist international relations, political studies, representation studies, anthropology, and critical border studies and collect the main theories about the gendered enforcement of the border, the genderization of the Other, and the humanitarization of migration that could be applied to the Mediterranean context. On the one hand, I use the hypothetical-deductive method to logically deduce the way these theories converge at sea and how the European border at sea works and materializes itself through gendered dynamics. On the other hand, I use the inductive method to verify my deductions from qualitative data including newspaper articles, reports, other researchers' interviews, international legal frameworks, guidelines, and procedures.

In the next section, I first analyze through political theories how the conception of the border has been constructed by the Western world through the genderization and racialization of the Other as the masculinized danger and feminized vulnerability. The representation of the gendered and racialized Other has been indeed essential for the Western subject to shape his masculine identity (Campbell, 1998). He is the patriot warrior and clement rescuer, based on his colonial heritage, and needs structural securitization *dispositifs* to ontologically legitimize his sovereignty (Bilgiç, 2018a; Carastathis et al., 2018) while preserving his goodness at the same time. Second, through anthropology, political studies and feminist international relations, I

explore how the framework of *crisis* about migration has helped the body politic to re-affirm these dynamics underlying the European identity in relation to the Other and achieve further legitimization to humanitarize the border and exacerbating its violence (Bilgiç, 2018b; Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Walters, 2010).

Departing from this argument, I develop the third section by exploring how these dynamics have worked at sea and ultimately conclude that the Mediterranean has been fundamental for the creation of gendered narratives around the Other and the framework of *crisis*. The geographical conditions of the Mediterranean sea have been a useful tool for Europe to develop hegemonic narratives in ways that could legitimize the enforcement and the increasing violence of its border.

In the first part of the third section, by using feminist theories, I explore how the sea exacerbates the uncontrollability of the sites of access (Perera, 2013) to the European territory, increasing the collective anxiety for an incumbent male invasion. I therefore explore how the uncontrollability of the sites of access, along with the presence of illegal channels, has been functional to create what Judith Butler (2003) describes as the suspension of governmentality. This suspension establishes the primate of sovereignty over governmentality and transforms the sea in a vast area of control where the border can easily move its materialization (Maitra, 2019).

In the second part of the third section, I use feminist theories on migration to investigate how the mobility of the border has instituted the state control over and the totalization of the sea as a border through the application of territorial criteria. I logically deduce that this *solidification* of the sea (Garelli, 2015) and the legitimization of the border's ubiquity have only been possible through the epistemological construction of gendered representations of the Other and the consequential preservation of the Self's identity. On the one hand, the masculinized danger

coming through uncontrollable channels has legitimized the enforcement of violence and control of the Mediterranean in the name of national security. On the other hand, based on the European desire to be the good savior, the Mediterranean has simultaneously been epistemologically constructed as the dangerous site through which responsibility for the vulnerable's death is outsourced.

In the third part of the third section, I explore how the ubiquitous and mobile materialization of the violent and masculine border throughout the sea has been legitimized by the European claim of saving the feminized vulnerable Other (Abu-Lughod, 2002) from the alleged adversity that the sea represents in hegemonic narratives. I investigate, therefore, how the so-far unchallenged monolithic representations of the Other woman (Mohanty, 1988) at sea shape international guidelines and procedures of sea search and rescue,[12] and I argue that the intent of these biased procedures is not to save lives but for the state to monopolize the decision about who lives and who dies.

In the fourth part of the third section, I collect qualitative data from newspapers and the little feminist research I found about the experience of women at sea. I deduce that there is no such thing as a monolithic risk that Third-world women face at sea. Indeed, the gendered and peculiar dangers that women face in the Mediterranean mainly come from the same dynamics that are fundamental for the state to maintain to reconfirm the European identity. Therefore, I argue that producing the preconceived feminized vulnerability at sea is a functional prerogative of border procedures, which create the material conditions for the Mediterranean to become the perfect area to construct a *crisis*.

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[12] Although I don't address it here, feminist theories broadly uncovered how unchallenged monolithic representations of the Other woman also shape the human rights framework of asylum and the process of integration in the society of destination.

I suggest that the narratives legitimizing the process of border enforcement strictly depend on the geographical conditions of it and that the sea constitutes an important but little-explored variable. In conclusion, I propose further feminist investigation to stem from this awareness, which would lead to new questions about accountability and structural injustice. Moreover, I argue that these questions should be developed by departing from women's embodied experiences, as suggested by Gloria Anzaldúa (2012). Women's stories at sea remain indeed unheard. Visibilizing them could have the potential of challenging the monolithic representation of feminized vulnerability, exploring how the border violates racialized bodies while attempting to control and shape their identities, and ultimately delegitimizing the European securitization regime.

SECTION 2
THE BORDER THROUGH GENDERED AND RACIALIZED BODIES: THE ROOT OF THE SUBJECT'S IDENTITY

The border is, by definition, a line that marks a separation between something on one side, the subject, and something on the other side, the object as seen from the inside. According to Anzaldúa's (2012) definition, the border is a *herida abierta* (open wound, p. 25), an area of struggle, where the *atravesados* (people who 'get crossed', p. 25) live in constant conflict, negotiation, and transition between the normativity of the Whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, ability, legality and their Self. The act of crossing the physical site of access to the Western world has an identitarian magnitude. *Atravesados*' identity stops being self-referential and begins existing in a relational dimension: they become the Other.

Through this identitarian process of *making and unmaking* (Perera, 2013) the Other's identity, not only is the border located in its geographical position but it permeates and materializes itself in people's non-normative bodies wherever they confront normativity. This process is, therefore, directly dependent on hegemonic discourses perpetuating the existence of and creating the conditions for this site of struggle. Anzaldúa (2012) unmasks the Western desire to preserve the existence of this "third country" (p. 25),[13] conquer it as a way to establish his supremacy, and subjugate those who reside in it for his own narrative and material purposes.

The Western purposes behind the construction of the border as both a concept and material violation of bodies residing in it have long been analyzed in different disciplines. From a traditional geopolitical point of view, borders and boundaries should be understood as socially constructed (Newman & Paasi, 1998) in at least two dimensions: identity and differentiation.

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[13] Anzaldúa (2012) defines the "third country" as the area of confrontation between the Western and the non-Western world.

Considering David Campbell's (1998) interpretation of the Hobbesian logic behind the fictitious construction of the modern Western state, the border exists because of and is constructed by the Leviathan as a fundamental way for him to determine the identity of the subject inside the border. By differentiating the rational, ordered, and civilized man inside from the dangerous and savage man outside, the Leviathan legitimizes his existence by opposing the safety he provides from the anarchy and state of nature that reside outside (Campbell, 1998). In this way, his existence becomes fundamental for the establishment of an ordered system and the safety of the civilized man.

The existence of a community inside the border would not be legitimate without the presence of a unitary subject, which is defined by differentiation. Consequently, identity is intrinsically connected to and dependent upon difference. Together, these dimensions are fundamental for the construction of the body politic and his sovereignty. Without differentiation, there would not be any unitary subject. And without a unitary subject, there would not be any legitimization of the Leviathan's sovereignty.

To establish a differentiation between the subject and what is different from him and, therefore, establish who the subject is starting from who he is not, the body politic also has to build a representation of the outsider. He does so through specific functional narratives that logically result in the outsider being who the subject does not want to be. It is therefore essential for the body politic to colonize the "third country" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25), the area where the subject meets the bodies that, through subjugation, come to be identified as the Other. From there, the subject can construct his identity as he desires (Campbell, 1998).

Not every body outside the border is identifiable as the Other. By normalizing the narratives about the subject's identity, the body politic finds his roots. He can, furthermore,

clearly demarcate a dichotomous distinction between friends and enemy (Derrida, 1997) through those very same roots, which appear as historically shared with the other subjects who identify similarly. The body politic discerns who is like the subject, who is in a similar position on the hierarchy of power, and who is not.

This process is intrinsically related to coloniality as the subject in question finds his roots through the identification of a subaltern Other, which is represented as savage, uncivilized, and inferior. The Other, therefore, only resides in racialized bodies as they are subjectable through dichotomic dynamics that make this differentiation absolute and unquestionable. As Sara Ahmed (2002) points out, colonialism has operated to "produce the bodies of the colonized as already raced, by constituting them as objects of knowledge" (p. 48). Throughout history and geography, race has been constructed by coloniality through the attribution of unquestionable meaning to skin color. Racialized bodies have been studied, violated, and controlled with the aim of epistemologically constructing them as a reconfirmation of the White body's superiority and legitimizing the racial hierarchy of power as 'objective' and neutral. They are the space where racialization exists as an objective, unquestionable, and legitimate hierarchy of power. They are therefore the object to which the White subject can represent himself as opposite.

Border critical studies are revealing how the sites where the border materializes itself work in a dynamic relation with hegemonic narratives. As Chiara Brambilla (2015) explains, the sites of *borderscapes* are far from being geographical and linear but work wherever they can produce and shape predetermined narratives about sovereignty. However, the epistemological production constantly undergoes a process of negotiation with changing material conditions, which the subject faces to re-establish the above-mentioned pre-existent ideology and epistemology legitimize his sovereignty (Brambilla, 2015).

Ali Bilgiç (2018b) recovers Brambilla's concept of mobile *borderscape* and explains that the process of definition of the subject's identity never ends. Instead, it leads to a continuous urgency for the subject to re-identify the Other with the *wrong* as a way to not compromise or alter his identity at every encounter with them. Bilgiç refers to this imperative refusal of diversity as a fundamental aspect of coloniality. It brings the body politic to constantly re-produce racialization through racialized bodies and reject them in order to "pre-empt a possible contamination of the body politic" (p. 551) itself.

Bilgiç recovers this concept from Roberto Esposito. Esposito (2008) defines this biological need of the body politic as an actual autoimmune reaction to the threat of diversity, which hangs over the immunity of the biopolitical system. According to Bilgiç, the relation between the body politic and the Other becomes a permanent process through which the body politic develops immunization. Thus, migrants entering the national territory by crossing the border are fundamental during this process. They are the obstacle with which the subject constantly needs to negotiate his identity, but their presence is necessary for the body politic to reaffirm it (Bilgiç, 2018b).

The autoimmune reaction works in two directions. For the foreign body to be neutralized, he has to provoke disgust and be fought against –as he produces fear for the survival and integrity of the subject– but also saved simultaneously. If the body politic needs to represent himself in a morally superior position as I argue above, he also needs to show emotions such as generosity and compassion on which the foreign body in question has to depend (Bilgiç, 2018b).

Therefore, the geographical border is the space where the entrance of the foreign body through the membrane of the body politic materially takes place, influencing the identity of the body politic in two dimensions: through the daily practices and encounters with the Other, the

subject performs the male role of warrior against the invasion but also rescuer of the helpless (Bilgiç, 2018b). For the process of reaction to work in these two dimensions, hegemonic narratives about the racialized Other are interlocked with gender. The epistemological production of the Other's identity is also double, and its two dimensions are constructed simultaneously. Since the subject desires to identify himself as strong against danger but also morally charitable toward the inferior, the Other gets masculinized in his harmfulness and feminized in her helplessness at the same time.

On the one hand, when migrants are represented in mainstream discourses as the invaders and as a threat to the nation, women are underrepresented or not represented at all. Newspapers and other sources of information have long shaped the collective imaginary about the alleged *refugee crisis* as male. For example, in *Europe's Man Problem*, the *Politico* reported that most of the migrants are men and that it "might sound sexist on the surface, but years of research has shown that male-dominated societies are less stable, because they are more susceptible to higher levels of violence, insurgence and mistreatment of women" (Hudson, 2016, para. 3). While it is not my intent to dwell on the clear sexism and racism of this argument, nor is to demonstrate that at least 50% of migrants are women,[14] it is interesting to question what is the reason behind this gendered misrepresentation. The reader's reaction to this article can be easily predicted. They must be frightened by the arrival of the violent, the unstable, and the morally wrong (the article also assumes that Western societies are less male-dominated and violent) man.

Due to the absence of women in this kind of narrative, the body politic legitimates the enforcement of a masculine state of security and the exercise of a masculine state of defense as a response to the arrival of the Schmittian male enemy (Derrida, 1997). Iris M. Young (2003)

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[14] Data already show this. See, for example, Binkowski (2016).

explains that, within this narrative, the masculine leader is supposed to fight against his enemy, who threatens his women, as well as "take all precautions against these threats, remain watchful and suspicious, and be ready to sacrifice for the sake of his loved ones" (p. 4). Following Jacques Derrida (1997), Sara Farris (2017) points out that the active muscular tension between *we* and the Other man precludes in fact any subjectivity to women. This rhetoric results in a useful narrative that legitimates a Machiavellian and violent approach to the border and seeks power in the name of the body politic's safety.[15]

On the other hand, migrant women are highly represented in those discourses that aim at generating compassion for migrants as dependent on Western clemency. As Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) interprets Gayatri Spivak's (1998) critique of White feminism, through the Western construction of the hegemonic culture about White and Western supremacy, Europe has interpreted the world outside its borders with the attitude of the "White man saving brown women from brown men" (p. 784). Feminist analyses on migration have long focused on consequent orientalist biases about Third-world women's disempowerment and their vulnerability to savage men.

Women are regarded as passive objects of conquest, as Derrida (1997) points out. The group of men that wins the masculine fight humiliates the enemy by taking possession of his women, who are the only means through which the nation can reproduce itself and its kinship. In *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France,* Miriam Iris

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[15] I am aware of the simplification I am making for the sake of my argument. The *sovereign man* has long been analysed by Queer theory and Feminist theory. I acknowledge the existence of this literature, which has produced fruitful insights for the investigation on International Relations. For example, Cyntia Weber (2016) in *Queer International Relations.* She brilliantly analyses how the binaries man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, White/Black, etc., are dynamically re-shaped for the *sovereign man* to re-establish his power relation over the Other. C. Weber provides a fundamental argument about homosexuality being one of the key categories that can be rattled off through different "regimes of knowledge" (p. 196) in order to manipulate the concept of "homosexual as or against sovereign man" (p. 196) so that the *sovereign man* "proliferates and persists" regardless of changes. The *sovereign man* is therefore complex and his identity works beyond the simple binary man/woman.

Ticktin (2011) builds upon the concept of the White savior. She explains that only vulnerable refugees have the right to be saved. Only their 'sickness' makes them human and deserving of compassion. "Only the suffering or sick body is seen as a legitimate manifestation of a common humanity, worthy of recognition in the form of rights" (p. 98), she says.

The passive, the vulnerable, the feminized Other is the only one who deserves to be saved. Within this hegemonic narrative, women become in fact the object of the male enemy and freeing them would elevate the subject as the winner and morally superior.[16] Moreover, since women are the victim of a *wrong*, oppressive, and savage culture, the collectivity can let them in (Farris, 2017) and assimilate them as a part of the autoimmune threat, which the body politic needs to incorporate in small doses in order to develop immunity against it (Esposito, 2008).

Hoping that I have not been too simplistic, these gendered, racialized, and simultaneous dimensions of the border are fundamental to explore the context of the *refugee crisis* and the universe of meaning around the Mediterranean sea. If it is true that the subject identifies himself by opposition to the Other on the basis of coloniality, it is also true that the European continent (coming from a colonialist past) manages immigration from the non-Western world the same way it perceives its identitarian goals for the future (Bilgiç & Pace, 2017). The *crisis,* an isolated and unpredictable event happening as an "anomaly unrelated to the quotidian order of things" (Barrios, 2017, p. 155), has therefore been seen as the perfect framework that describes migration depending on how Europe wants to react to it.

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[16] I am, again, simplifying. This epistemological construction is not limited to women but applies to all those bodies that prove to be feminized, vulnerable, and needy of being saved (Ticktin, 2019).

2.1   Migration as a *Crisis*

As Janet Roitman (n.d.) explains in her intervention on the debate about it*, crisis* has become a "defining category" (para. 4) of contemporary history. According to her, the term *crisis* inaugurates a suspension in the present to reflect on it and produce truth about history. A *crisis* is a fundamental moment in history that indicates a diagnosis, a deep investigation into epistemological and ethical constructions. It looks for moral answers regarding the contradictions between existing dichotomous dynamics, such as ethics and progress, that were covered until then. A *crisis* marks a reevaluation of the past, in line with the desire of creating a new and different future. Therefore, a *crisis* is a temporary moment in history.

However, the *refugee crisis* –interpreted as the state of alert for the uncertain but always possible threat of migration– has been protracted in time. What started as an emergency circumstance has "been largely transformed into chronic conditions" (Feldman, 2015, p. 431), which makes it clear that in this case the term *crisis* has been misused and instrumentalized.[17]

As Anna Carastathis et al. (2018) point out, European institutions have produced immigration policies and emergency management by epistemologically framing migration as *crisis*. According to them, the framework of *crisis* gave the body politic the opportunity of moving the attention from the embodied experience of violence to the European subject accepting the Other.

In times of neoliberalism and border uncertainty, continuously reconfirming migration as a possible and ongoing threat is useful for the state as it allows the body politic to re-focus on himself and his territory. When a *crisis* becomes chronic, indeed, its meaning extremely differs

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[17] Although Feldman (2015) talks about a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon, the chronical temporality of the *refugee crisis* is translatable in geographical terms. As Feldman points out, humanitarian claims are in general used as "cover for imperial adventures" (p. 428) under an international regime of humanitarian law, which is a transversal aspect of humanitarianism and its political instrumentalization.

from Roitman's (n.d.) definition as it is perceived as something uncontrollable and everlasting by the subject dealing with it. Also, it could suddenly bring deleterious consequences within the system. As the *Politico* article implied (Hudson, 2016), migrants' unstable and male-dominated culture is dangerous for the Western countries since it could spread all over the continent, and produces uncertainty for the European identity's future.

Securitization, which Foucault (2009) defines as fundamental for the state to regulate, maintain, and perpetuate the system of power relations within the body politic, is therefore legitimate. In the context of an emergency circumstance that is neither controllable nor predictable but persists over time, the chronic perception of potential danger is directly connected to the way the border is enforced for security purposes. Consequently, the framework of *crisis* is also essential for the subject to constantly re-define and re-confirm himself through a dynamic and renewed relationship with the Other (represented as one monolithic threat: the *crisis*), as explained above.

Crossing the border from the non-Western world to the West has become for migrants a matter of life and death, which made it possible for Europe to translate some of its borders into humanitarian ones (Walters, 2010). Following this path, Nick Vaughan-Williams (2015) points out that "humanitarian bordering practices" (p. 95) are "designed to enhance and optimize the lives of irregular migrants potentially ending up killing or dehumanizing the very people that they claim to protect" (p. 95). Western democracies are characterized by the increasing individualization of risk management and privatization of the system of securitization, which translates migration policies into a matter of humanitarianism (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Instead, migration should be seen as a matter of politics. This transformation of the securitization system allows Europe to choose to save deserving lives while letting others die without

responsibility. As securitization and the narratives legitimizing it go together, this approach to migration is designed to be protracted in time through the framework of *crisis* as a way for the state to guarantee the course of its vital functions.

The *refugee crisis* has been addressed as a shock coming from outside the system and, thus, has been depoliticized. With 'depoliticized' I suggest that the framework of *crisis* helps the European subject to decontextualize the phenomenon of migration from any cause or continuation from the past. The inconsistency of this interpretation becomes particularly clear with regard to international responsibility. While the European Union addresses migration as a matter of security and rights, as not-eligible asylum-seekers are a threat to reject and deserving asylum-seekers have the right to get asylum, there is no public debate about the European obligation to provide those rights. As Leanne Weber (2006) points out, the state sovereignty extends the border throughout water in the name of national security; but "seems to vanish in relation to any associated domestic and international responsibilities" (p. 31). Seeing migration as a *crisis*, indeed, helps hegemonic narratives to focus on the journey at sea per se and forget, for example, that people face it in such dangerous conditions due to the absence of safer alternatives.

The framework of *crisis* has created the *perfect storm*, allowing the European identity to reaffirm himself through the management of migration and the enforcement of the border in response to a renewed urgency of dealing with and attempting to control the Other (Bilgiç, 2018a) while pretending to save her. Besides the male threat to the body politic's immune system, there is a good and vulnerable Other as well. I argue that the framework of *crisis* allows the body politic to represent her at the mercy of a depoliticized journey at sea toward a better, more just, freer place to live, and thus allows him to represent himself as the civilized and

developed she desires to join. She deserves to be saved from her man, but also from the bad situation she has put herself in, the sea. Her existence as vulnerable at sea is fundamental for the subject to perform his compassion; but within the framework of *crisis* and due to the uncontrollable sea, her death would not be his responsibility.

Therefore, "humanitarianism is not the alternative to European border security, but its fundamental constitutive dimension" (Bilgiç, 2018a, p. 550). As William Walters (2010) points out, the creation of humanitarian borders is only possible under certain circumstances, where the "Global North and Global South confront one another in a very concrete, abrasive way, and where gradients of wealth and poverty, citizenship and non-citizenship appear especially sharply" (p. 146). In this sense, Walters agrees with Anzaldúa (2012) by seeing the borders between the Western and non-Western world as a sharp fence where the "Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 25). Yet crossing this fence at sea adds unexplored variables to these dynamics. Walters does not explore the element of the sea, but as he suggests, "it is tempting to speculate that geography is an important factor here" (p. 146).

Considering the arguments of this section, in the following section I am going to explore how these dynamics have worked at sea. I argue that the Mediterranean facilitates the construction of a humanitarian polarization around experiences, which reduces them to a matter of life and death and allows the state to justify its securitization through advanced surveillance technology as necessary.

SECTION 3
THE NATURALIZATION OF GENDERED VIOLENCE BEHIND THE SEA

On the basis of the previous section, for the border to be transformed into a humanitarian area it has to be fluctuating. I argue that the Mediterranean represents the perfect space to create the narratives about the *perfect storm* (Bilgiç 2018a). Its geographical and natural features create the perfect circumstances for *making and unmaking* (Perera, 2013) the material separation between the non-Western world and the West and constituting an unpredictable threat depending on the "shifting routes of the migrants themselves" (Walters, 2010, p. 148).

The geographical conditions of the Mediterranean facilitate and exacerbate the coexistence of the double gendered narrative I mentioned earlier. At sea, migrant women perforate the membrane of the body politic; face the violence of what he manages as its immune defense to an undetermined threat coming to an indefinite environment such as water; but also embody the instrument through which he hides his responsibility for his violence and succeeds in emerging as the *good* savior.

Water does not discriminate against human beings for their gender, their race, their ethnicity, their class, and it gets dangerous for everyone if faced through inappropriate means. The sea, the ocean, the waves are natural elements and, consequently, they are a neutral matter. Yet Whiteness has soaked them with narratives that evocate a very complex, gendered, and racialized universe of meaning (Helmreich, 2017).

From the elaboration of rationalism and its exportation to *Magna Grecia* for the sake of freedom and economic prosperity, the mainstream version of the Mediterranean history is dotted with self-referential Western experiences. These experiences get elevated as magnificent experiments toward progress. In fact, the Mediterranean has long been seen as the place of freedom, knowledge, and discovery for White adventures (Perera, 2013). Ulysses's Odyssey

through unknown and dangerous waters has long been elaborated as a metaphor for the man's reason, bravery, and virtue. For example, Dante Alighieri represents Ulysses as the perfect human hero and his search for new knowledge as the highest virtue.

On the other hand, non-Western bodies at water are associated with hazard, transgression, and danger by hegemonic narratives (Maitra, 2019). Although the Mediterranean is a geographically shared area, as Iain Chambers (2010) explains, Europe has epistemologically monopolized the control over it with the result that non-White narratives at sea get filtrated by a relational dimension to reconfirm the European supremacy. Otherwise, they get invisibilized wherever they cannot serve this purpose.

The Greco-Persian Wars are an emblematic example of how the barbaric non-Western enemy has been represented at sea. Persians were portrayed as monsters, as a population led by a tyrant attempting to end the magnificence of the Greek democracy. They fearlessly faced dangerous waves with the irrationality of those who are not afraid to die. The most important and widely celebrated Western figure that challenged Persians was Themistocles, the rational hero who saved Athens from destruction by suggesting the use of triremes. Triremes, in fact, proved to be crucial to the victory of the *good* and forward-looking man, who dominates the sea with his *reason*, over the strong but irrational beast.

On the other hand, when narratives about the non-Western subject and the Mediterranean have nothing to do with the *logos* and are not useful for Whiteness to reconfirm its supremacy, they are silenced and forgotten instead. In *The Left to Die Boat*, an audiovisual investigation about 72 migrants who were left to die on a dinghy in the Central Mediterranean (one of the most heavily-monitored seas on earth), the speaker rhetorically asks the viewers: how can we

reconstruct accountability and violation of law "when the murder weapon is the water itself?" (Forensic Architecture [FA], 2012, 0:39).

I agree with Yarimar Bonilla and Naomi Klein (2019) when they assume that there is no such a thing as a natural disaster, nor are there natural causes for the massive violence that targeted groups or populations suffer. Coloniality, inequality, racial capital, and power relations are instead the factors that systematically expose some groups more than others to natural hazards. I argue that the sea is not dangerous per se but the danger comes from the political and structural dynamics of power behind it: the more the border is enforced, the more the sea becomes deadly.

According to Daniel Hartley's (2016) interpretation of culture, the hegemonic cultural fix, which Stephen Shapiro (2014) refers to as the hegemonic reproduction of identities and social relations, is not enough to explain how oppression reproduces itself through culture. Hartley argues that, besides ideological processes legitimating the reproduction of injustice, culture is itself comprehensive of material conditions that make it possible for a narrative to consolidate and vice versa. The material conditions of the sea –along with the enforcement of the border through it and the way the body politic decides to narrate about it and migrants crossing it– legitimate, reproduce, and depend on each other in a dynamic and dialectic manner.

I suggest that the relationship between the border, the sea, and gendered and racialized bodies should be considered in at least three dimensions that interact with each other, constitute each other, and could not exist without the others. First, the uncontrollability of the sea, and therefore the unpredictability of the threat crossing the border. Second, the transformation of the sea into a *solid* (Garelli, 2015) space as an attempt to control the unpredictable monolithic arrival of the Other, dangerous threat but vulnerable victim at the same time. Third, the gendered

representation of a monolithic feminized Other at sea and the way it biases European rescue procedures in a way that reconfirms the European savior identity. I dedicate one part of this section to each of these dimensions. In the fourth and last part of this section, I investigate how these three dimensions materialize the masculine border by imposing and perpetuating migrant women's vulnerability.

3.1   The Uncontrollability of the Border and its Mobility

The first dimension acting upon the relation between the border, the sea, and gendered and racialized bodies is the material uncontrollability of the sea, which results in the uncontrollability of the sites of access to the European territory. The Mediterranean sea is vast. It flows through Spain, France, Italy, Greece, some of the countries that constitute European identity, and through Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Turkey. Migrants crossing it come from countless cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, from Afghanistan to Syria to Pakistan to Bangladesh to Eritrea to Nigeria to Ivory Coast. They massively use unofficial and illegal means of transportation, their mobility is unpredictable, and the waves they navigate are indefinite. According to Suvendrini Perera (2013), they enter the border as units challenging the central pillar that guarantees the state survival: the stability of its borders.

Alexander Weheliye (2014) recovers Giorgio Agamben's (1998) theorization of *bare lives*, indicating that they are to be understood as racialized bodies. Racialization has historically made *bareness* normative as the body's skin has allowed the perpetuation of irreparable dichotomies of power between what is human and what is "non-quite-human" (p. 19). Earlier, I referred to racialized bodies as Ahmed (2002) sees them, namely the site where racialization

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materializes through the preconceived meanings that coloniality has assigned to black and brown skin color (Ahmed, 2002).

However, the definition of racialized bodies in the context of the European border needs to be extended, as Bilgiç (2018b) notes, to all those bodies that are perceived as dangerous strangers (Ahmed, 2015). Not all strangers are dangerous, but some of them produce preconceived fear in the subject. Fear has long been constructed by Whiteness through colonial narratives about black and brown bodies. These narratives exist before the encounter between the subject and the Other and shape the norm that regulates it *ex-ante*. Black and brown bodies crossing the sea toward the Western world are narrated as a male danger, as I mentioned above, and these narratives have consolidated around the preconceived idea that the act of crossing the border from the non-Western world to the West is centered on illegality.

Therefore, every body crossing the border in the same illegal manner becomes *a priori* a racialized stranger producing fear in the subject even before the stranger's arrival since illegality is directly connected to danger by the norm. Racialized bodies in the context of the European border are all those bodies that get invisibilized and absorbed behind the nebulous intersection between the idea of a monolithic black and brown Other and the act of illegally crossing the Western border from the non-Western world. And border procedures are planned accordingly. As Ahmed (2015) explains, "the blurrier the figure of the stranger *the more bodies can be caught by it*" (p. 215).[18]

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[18] Note that I am only referring to the specific moment and space of crossing the border at sea. Undocumented migrants' boats get pushed-back or pulled-back regardless of passengers' skin color. In fact, the autoimmune violent rejection of diversity by the state and, therefore, border procedures are already-made based on preconceived narratives about the arrival of the black and brown Other before the Other arrives. Yet this generalization that puts together, for example, white, black, and brown migrants coming from the non-Western world, is surely not valid for what concerns the time *after* crossing, when they enter the European territory and society. At that time, indeed, they have to navigate other dynamics of racialization that I am not going to address here. See for example Adrija Maitra (2019), who points out that different grades of discrimination against refugees based on their race and ethnicity already takes place within the refugee camp, shortly after crossing.

Also Judith Butler (2003) recovers the concept of *bare lives* which, following Weheliye's (2014) critique of Agamben (1998), are to be understood as racialized bodies. According to her, the modern state exercises the suspension of the rule of law as a way of enforcing his sovereignty. In *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*, Butler (2003) writes about the state of exception as the place where *bare lives* are dehumanized in the gap between governmentality and sovereignty. While governmentality is the ordinary conceptualization of the state power over its territory with fixed borders through the rule of law, sovereignty exercises its domination also where the rule of law is unable to act. In this suspensive site in between, the state creates the indefinite detention, which is an illegitimate exercise of power but also a consistent *strategy*[19] for the state to suspend and neutralize the rule of law in the name of security (Butler, 2003). In this sense, the exclusive state of suspension becomes normalized as a norm that legitimates the precedence of sovereignty over the rule of law.

Not only is the suspension in which migrants' bodies find themselves reproduced by the state, but it is also essential for the state to ensure its sovereignty precedes the rule of law, and the exceptional precedes the ordinary operations in the name of security (Butler, 2003). If the suspension of governmentality is functional to sovereignty, and if sovereignty depends on identity and differentiation,[20] the suspension of the Other is also functional to identify who the Other is and, in relation to him, who the subject is. That is to say, the suspension of racialized bodies guarantees the security of the subject, which is also what the subject identifies himself with.

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[19] I am here using *strategy* as de Certeau (1984) defines it as opposed to *tactic*. According to de Certeau, strategy is the purview of power and the self-referential way strategy leaders seek to control the Other.

[20] As I explained in the previous section, the encounter between the subject and the Other is an obstacle to immunity but also a fundamental step in the constant re-confirmation of the subject's identity.

The very same language that Butler uses is directly attributable to the sea and those borders that Walters (2010) had called humanitarian. The Mediterranean sea is indeed *fluctuating*, *unstable*, *unpredictable*, and *suspensive*. The dynamism of water helps with the construction process of the perfect state of exception through which the body politic can legitimate his sovereignty, perpetuate his violence against the Other to protect immunity, establish a securitization state, and the subject can still identify himself as the good, White, male savior.

That the uncontrollability of the threat is functional to the state becomes evident in the fight against smugglers, which often resulted in a pretended commitment to control crime for mediatic purposes, without any particular result. Authorities oftentimes declare they detained a smuggler, who most of the time ends up being just the driver of a boat. As *The Guardian* notices, smugglers designate one of the (male) passengers of the boat as the driver: "no smuggler, with family in Turkey and a steady income from the lucrative smuggling trade, would want to end up illegally in Europe and risk not being able to return home, where he would be likely to face arrest anyway" (Khan, 2015, para. 12). Authorities are likely aware of these usual facts, but taking home the merit of catching the smuggler is worth the arrest of a scapegoat, male innocent.

Bilgiç (2018a) reports that these aggressive and masculine behaviors of authorities arresting, pushing-back, and pulling-back boats have the direct consequence of encouraging migrants to remain invisible and undertake illegal and dangerous channels to cross the border. It is more convenient to try crossing illegally than not trying at all as there are no accessible, safe, and legal ways to reach Europe. While exploring how migrants are excluded from the international framework of human rights, Marie-Benedicte Dembour and Tobias Kelly (2011) note that "the imposition of strict border control by States has not been accompanied by effective

controls on the activities of smugglers and traffickers. This is a major contributing factor to the violation of migrants' rights and border deaths" (p. 55).

Vanessa D. Plumly (2016) recovers Weheliye's (2014) critique and integrates it with Ahmed's (2015) investigation into the *Cultural Politics of Emotions* in order to analyze the context of refugees' inclusion. Ahmed explains how emotions work to perform sovereignty through the distinction between bodies that deserve love and others that deserve suffering depending on colonial narratives. Plumly builds on this argument and explains that this distinction is based on Whiteness and citizenship in a way that the non-White and non-citizen body legitimately produces fear. At the same time, violence is only legitimate when it is perpetuated by Whiteness and the fear produced by racialized bodies[21] is celebrated when it is useful for Whiteness to further legitimize violence and, ultimately, gaining more power through violence.

The indefiniteness and the illegality of access to the European territory, along with the vagueness of the identity of the Other, cause anxiety (Bilgiç, 2018a). If anxiety and fear are fundamental to legitimize the masculine defense of the body politic's sovereignty (Ahmed, 2015; Bilgiç, 2018b; Plumly, 2016), therefore the state profits from guaranteeing that people's journey at sea remains dangerous and illegal. This suggests that smugglers are functional to the construction of an exceptional state around the masculinized enemy. It also suggests that the war against them allows authorities to identify as the warrior and the body politic to be discharged from his responsibility while, at the same time, pretending to prevent people from undertaking dangerous journeys and ending up in malicious male hands (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018). As I

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[21] It is here important to bear in mind that, with racialized bodies, I refer to all those bodies that get invisibilized at the nebulous intersection between the monolithic black and brown Other and the act of illegally crossing the Western border from the non-Western world.

mentioned in the previous section, this is also how the framework of *crisis* allowed Europe to see migration as a shock coming from outside and avoid any conversation about the European obligations to guarantee the rights Europe claims to protect.

In response to the immunological male threat coming through the indefiniteness of water and uncontrollable channels, as Adrija Maitra (2019) observes in the North shore of Lesvos based on Perera's theorization of the border at sea, border patrolling activities at sea have very peculiar connotations: they extend geographical borders "from the territorial landmass upon the sea space" (p. 36). The indefiniteness of water makes the border at sea a "visualization of a concept projected onto the sea" (p. 39) as its geographical location depends on estimation and does not have any visual reference that can detect it.

Therefore, the border appears only when the authorities perform it through procedures at the encounter with the arrivals. In fact, authorities perform border procedures whether or not they are at the geographical border. For instance, they could perform the border even though their encounter with those migrants who have already made it to the Greek land without being intercepted at sea (Maitra, 2019). It is at the encounter between authorities and racialized bodies that arrivals begin embodying illegality, and it is at that encounter that the border materializes through the masculine performances of authorities (Bilgiç, 2018b).

According to Bilgiç (2018b), authorities' emotions are constructed through hegemonic narratives of colonial masculinity, and so are their reactions at the encounter with the racialized Other. The more authorities feel anxious and fearful around the Other, the more they will perform violence at the encounter as a way of subjugating him. As Bilgiç (2018b) interprets Ahmed (2015), fear is a key aspect of the migration-security binomial as it constructs the "EU's citizen-warrior masculinity" (p. 552) and brings the subject to the necessary elimination of the

masculinized threat as a matter of "self-preservation" (p. 552). Border patrol authorities perform the fearful reaction to the dangerous Other by "pushing-back irregular migrant boats and letting their occupants die in bad weather and sea conditions" (p. 552).

Therefore, transmitting the subject's fear to the masculinized and dangerous Other and making him fear for his life seems to be the way the border pervades and *solidifies* the sea (Garelli, 2015). As Plumly (2016) points out, fear exists only when the Western subject feels it and, therefore, feeling fear is legitimate only for Whiteness. Consequently, White fear is the only legitimate reason to respond with violence, and the violence resulting from this process legitimates that the White body gains more power over the racialized one.

The border gets mobilized as it translates upon the sea depending on the authorities' presence at water and depending on their encounter with racialized bodies. For example, even if migrants are spotted in Turkish waters, Greek authorities performing push-backs feel legitimized to move the border outside their national territory and preemptively attack them even before they enter Greek waters and before they become illegal. Thus, due to its mobility throughout the sea, the border succeeds in exacerbating its violence and invading each and every point of encounter.

3.2   The Solid Sea

The second dimension acting upon the relation between the border, the sea, and racialized and gendered bodies is the *solidification* of the sea, legitimated as a form of securitization in response to the unpredictability of the Other and the uncontrollability of his arrival. As I mentioned above, this dimension is strictly interconnected with the mobility of the border, which is only feasible due to the features of the sea.

The border totalizes migrants' entire experience of navigating the sea. The whole sea becomes a massive area of suspension where the body politic attempts to control racialized bodies and decide for their life and death. Glenda Garelli (2015) writes that "it is a sea literally 'solid': a sea whose depths are filled by people's remnants and whose bottoms are crowded with shipwrecks" (p. 4).

Even though Garelli's (2015) analysis regards the relationship between Europe and Tunisia, it can be easily translated at the European border with Turkey. "The struggle of migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean is not left to the waters, so to speak—to the humanitarian predicament of a *crisis* and fatalities at sea—but is instead situated in its imbrications with the politics of the land" (Garelli, 2015, p. 3). Before President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to open the Turkish border at the beginning of 2020, Turkish Coast Guard (TCG) authorities were the vessels at sea performing masculine violence to control and prevent migrants from crossing towards Europe according to the EU-Turkey agreement (European Council [EUCO], 2016).[22]

The state *solidifying* approach to the sea requires that the Mediterranean is ruled over as a land extension through the concept of *neighborhood* (Garelli, 2015). According to Alison Gerard and Sharon Pickering (2014), Europe tries to move the responsibility for migrants' lives to the other side of the European border, as if migration could only be legitimate until migrants encounter the sea. From the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement on, NGOs have frequently reported TCG pull-backs, to which Greek authorities used to react by condemning TCG's violence (Aegean Boat Report [ABR], 2020a). However, pull-backs were how Turkey used to protect the European border on Europe's behalf and prevent migrants from reaching

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[22] The EU-Turkey agreement is a not legally binding statement of cooperation between the European Union and Turkey, which seeks to control migration from Turkey to the European Union. It is funded on the assumption that Turkey is a safe country for migrants to seek asylum in and stipulates that, among other commitments in exchange of money, Turkey will take any necessary measures to prevent migrants from crossing (EUCO, 2016).

European shores. Due to the EU-Turkey agreement, Europe's attempt to externalize the border made it Turkey's responsibility to enforce it and manage it with the European interest in mind.

By condemning the violence of Turkish authorities and pretending to treat migrants better, European authorities were looking at the Other as victimized, feminized, and in need of their help. In fact, the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG)[23] and Frontex often played the role of the good savior rescuing her from the bad, non-Western authority.

However, since Turkey declared that they were not going to prevent migrants from crossing anymore, there have been numerous cases of boats in distress conditions in the Aegean Sea. Only a few of these boats managed to reach the Greek shore. The *Alarm Phone* (2020) reported several cases of "grave human rights violations, including shootings [by Greek authorities] and other attacks of boats by masked men who would remove engines and leave people behind in acute distress" (para. 1) in order to make them drift back to Turkey. Greek authorities have dramatically increased the number of push-backs, entering Turkish waters to tow dinghies back there. By performing push-backs, Greek authorities move the border even outside their territory: if the uncontrollability of access increases, the border enlarges its prerogative, its violence, and its area of control.

After Erdogan's decision, the Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, said that "Turkey has become an official trafficker of migrants to the European Union, and Greece does not accept this situation" (Stevis-Gridneff, 2020, para. 36). Suddenly, Turkey was not going to do the dirty work for them anymore, which is where Greece found legitimization to shift from being the good savior of the female helpless Other to the defender of national security.

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[23] Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) is the Greek coast guard.

Push-backs and pull-backs are procedures of deterrence and prevention since attacking migrants, causing them fear, is justified as a way to prevent them from trying the illegal and dangerous crossing again. They are also a means of protecting the body politic, and a way to close the state border in response to and legitimized by Turkey's sudden, illicit, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and irrational decision to open their one. "The problem is an asymmetric threat and illegal invasion of thousands of people that threatens our territory" (Stevis-Gridneff, 2020, para. 36), the Prime Minister said. From that moment on, he declared himself ready to fight to protect the border. Migrants on their way to Europe become dehumanized in the space between states negotiating their relations, and their bodies at sea are treated as a currency of exchange. The border, indeed, has the power of reducing people's entire journey to the act of illegally crossing it.

For the sea to become *solid* and controllable through territorial criteria, the border needs to be moved and vice versa, which is why these dimensions co-operate and are inseparable from each other. Ultimately, they need the state's complete control over the sea. Talking about Lesvos, Maitra (2019) observes how the exceptional unpredictability of events also makes it a monopoly of state boats to move freely along the border. She notes that the NGO's rescue boat (Mo Chara) she was working with could not get close to the border, which would "cause trouble" (p. 43) for them. Also, Mo Chara "could only launch once a day, unless a dinghy was spotted, then they needed further permission" (p. 43). In order for them to continue their operations, NGOs continuously have to play by authorities' rules.

As Nicholas R. Micinski (2019) observes on the North shore of Lesvos, due to the failure of the Greek state and the European Union to manage the increasing flow of arrivals, international volunteers, NGOs and other parts of society began auto-organizing in a network of

everyday coordination mechanisms.[24] These mechanisms include informal ways of

communication among individuals (for instance, WhatsApp groups, word of mouth, etc.), shared

procedures, knowledge based on individuals' experiences, and shared goals, which have often

conflicted with the state interests and undermined officials' authority. For this reason, Greek

authorities started a race to institutionalize, co-opt, and boycott NGOs' presence on the island

and their operations (Micinski, 2019).

Due to NGOs' *everyday cooperation mechanisms* (Micinski, 2019), institutions

constantly feel threatened and undermine NGOs' presence on the ground, ultimately bringing

rising right-wing nationalists to establish a proper criminalization of humanitarian work at sea.

Many NGOs have indeed occurred in legal issues with the charges of facilitating illegal

migration and smugglers' activities at sea. As the European Parliament (EP, 2018) reported, the

public debates within the Member States shifted from praising humanitarian work at sea to

blaming it as the "pull factor" (p. 24) for people to undertake their journey at sea.

However, as the European Parliament (2018) investigated, states use NGOs as scapegoats

for the lack of coordination of immigration policies and long-term solutions among the Member

States, and their failure to completely "outsource border protection" (p. 108) to extra-

communitarian countries and enforce a deterrence system blocking migration flows. At the same

time, while states focus on NGOs' alleged cooperation with smugglers and facilitation of

migration, deaths increase in proportion to the number of arrivals (Fundamental Rights Agency

[FRA], 2018). That is to say, the presence of NGOs at sea facilitates the state control over the

solid sea on a propaganda dimension and turns migration into a humanitarian matter, which

discharges the state from any responsibility on the deaths.

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[24] As the *New York Times* reports, in 2015 volunteers and locals were left alone to deal with large numbers of
arrivals and filled the absence of authorities (Mackey, 2015).

As Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli (2018) point out, from the state perspective, the *military-humanitarianism* against smugglers and NGOs and the humanitarian agenda regarding authorities' activities of rescue are not in contrast with each other. Indeed, for the state, they are both attempts to stop migration flows before people arrive in Europe. "In this context, humanitarianism becomes the framework for refugees' blockage in transit—through measures of rescue and capture" (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018, p. 698).

Indeed, it is up to the state to decide who lives and who dies. If NGOs want to keep operating and help people at sea, they have to do it while following the rules, otherwise authorities will feel threatened and obstruct them. As Maitra (2019) highlights, NGO's sea search and rescue operations happen when someone crosses the border and when the state decides so, so that he can decide who lives and who dies and then take credit for those who were rescued. Depending on the situation, sea search and rescue NGOs can therefore result in useful tools during operations, as they are expert of, equipped for, and committed to rescuing, or obstacles to fight against (they are perceived as a threat to the state sovereignty and his control over the border). Thus, instead of focusing on saving lives, state authorities have the prerogative of deciding where and when the border will materialize and guaranteeing that they preserve the monopoly of intervention in life and death.

3.3   The Monolithic Woman at the Border at Sea

The third and last dimension I address of the relationship between the border, the sea, and racialized and gendered bodies, is the material and gendered relations of power shaped by and shaping hegemonic narratives on migrant bodies at sea. I argue that the European pretension of

saving the feminized and vulnerable Other from dangerous waters and her man legitimizes the ubiquitous feature of the border and the *solid* sea it produces.

How does the state justify the extreme autoimmune reaction (Esposito, 2008) in cases when the Other is helpless, vulnerable, and feminized? On March 2nd, 2020, two children died at sea off Lesvos. A young Syrian boy's death was reported by authorities, who claimed that people on board had destabilized their boat in order to be rescued, ultimately capsizing it (ABR, 2020b). Ten days later, *Aljazeera* (2020) reported interviews with some of the people who had traveled on the same boat and claimed that a baby from Iraq had also been lost at sea during the journey. His death had gone unreported by authorities. According to the *Aljazeera*'s investigation and the passengers' version of the story, the children had fallen into the water because the boat in question had been attacked by HCG. According to this version, authorities dangerously approached the dinghy and deliberately put in distress passengers by causing big waves to frighten and convince them to go back to Turkey (Aljazeera, 2020). As the border has increased its violence, the responsibility for the deaths is avoided by projecting it to the sea. The Iraquian baby's life got invisibilized in the midst of waves, and the two children's murder was covered behind the sea and the unpredictability of the irresponsible and irrational behavior of migrants.

Since 2015, the *refugee crisis* continues with the same dynamics through these kinds of representations. The Other is a monolithic object, a masculine dangerous but beatable threat and, at the same time, a feminized victim deserving to be saved. Yet if she dies, it is not the responsibility of the state. The sea plays a fundamental role in this gendered process of representation, as it is seen as the uncontrollable site of access to the body politic but also the natural element to which the female and victimized Other is naturally vulnerable.

When women are represented at sea, their representation is extremely altered by hegemonic universes of meaning. Essentialist claims ignoring the intersectional nature of oppression are still well-spread both in the developmental field and disaster management. In particular, research on disaster management, the non-Western world and gender still look at emergency response through a Eurocentric lens and from the state perspective. Third-world countries and Third-world women are still seen as a monolithic block. As Chandra T. Mohanty (1988) points out, the political project of mainstream Western feminism builds upon the alleged existence of a homogeneous victimized group of Third-world women that White feminism must save.

When she talks about Third-world women and their rescue, Anna Dimitríjevics (2007) departs from this assumption to state that the worse gender inequality is in the Third World the less women are likely to have the skills to survive as opposed to men. "Women tend to be physically weaker as well, in part due to greater nutritional deficiencies, and they may lack skills such as swimming or tree climbing which could save lives in certain types of disaster" (sect. 6, para. 4) she says.

Elaine Elarson and Lourdes Meyreles (2004) address the way the developmental literature has problematically affected emergency management. This narrative that sees women at a higher risk than men enforces the Western approach to the racialized and sexualized Other. Women become powerless and vulnerable bodies to rescue; men become strong and able bodies that are less exposed to risk. As the authors highlight, the relation between gender and emergency response has mostly been investigated in relation to the non-Western world by Western researchers producing theory from the West (especially from universities in the US),

which has produced ideological representations rather than analyses based on lived experiences and material circumstances.

According to Allison M. Young (1994), "the temptation to view refugee women as a homogenous group is due, in large part, to an international refugee regime which does not concern itself with local flight and resettlement conditions and their effects on refugee women, but which takes a more top-down universal approach to all refugee contexts" (p. 124). Although A. M. Young does not refer to refugees' rescue and emergency management, the essentialism coming from developmental studies and disaster management also permeates the Western view on non-Western people at sea and influences the European approach to the border in the Mediterranean.

These ideological representations are indeed largely used by international guidelines. In 2014, *Oxfam* and the *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (OCHA) published an infographic to explain that pre-existent gender inequalities affect the way people react to emergencies. According to this snapshot, "men are more confident in their survival skills," and "women are rarely strong swimmers or confident in their survival skills" (Oxfam & OCHA, 2014). Oftentimes, it is also reported that migrant women are disadvantaged in their crossing because of their clothes. The Alarm Phone (2018) reports that "many women wear longer and heavier clothes than men, making it more difficult to stay above water when they have fallen into the sea" (para. 5), implying that most migrant women use veils and other garments typical of Islam and, therefore, are *a priori* disadvantaged at sea. However, this statement extremely generalizes migration in terms of culture, religion, and gender and lacks of any reference to contextual diversity.

Migrant single mothers and women, along with children, are considered to be the vulnerable and weak segment at sea regardless of their background, and sea search and rescue procedures are planned consequently by international organizations and governmental agencies. Vulnerability is indeed a key category that indelibly marks the experiences of migrants in Europe. From the moment they cross the border at sea and are, for the first time, labeled as more or less vulnerable to the natural element of water, vulnerability permanently remains a relevant concept influencing the whole bureaucratic process of applying for asylum and being included in the European society.

Since before the start of the alleged *crisis*, recommendations from the United Nations and the European Union have given rescue procedures the priority of saving the vulnerable first. The orientalist approach to migrant women biases international guidelines on rescue in a way that categorizes them as unequivocally more vulnerable to the sea than men, implying that all migrant women come from a disadvantaged background and a male-dominated culture. In a way, they also imply that men are sufficiently equipped to survive and, therefore, can be rescued later.

In 2003, the Parliamentary Assembly *Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population* recommended that vulnerable people "who arrive at seaports or coastal areas, even if they do not apply for asylum, be given appropriate assistance and accommodation pending their removal or the granting of legal status" (art. I.10.iii.g), and that special provisions and exemptions "should be introduced to differentiate the treatment accorded to unaccompanied minors/separated children and other vulnerable cases" (art. II.3.1.15).

Later on, the *Committee* assumes that these other vulnerable cases are mainly women along with children. For example, in the case of large-scale or group arrivals by sea, the *Committee* reports with concern that "vessels are not in good working conditions, they are loaded

with people well beyond their capacity and conduct dangerous maneuvers to avoid being intercepted by military or police units. As in the case of the East Sea, they transport children and women and navigate irrespective of bad sea or weather conditions" (art. II.3.1.9).

The same year, also the 54th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Executive Committee* (2003) recommended interception measures at sea and asylum seekers' treatment to be considered in light of a list of particular circumstances. One of these is that "women and children and those who are otherwise vulnerable should be considered as a matter of priority" (para. 9.5).

Furthermore, the *United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction* (UNDRR, 2011), providing a list of priority areas to make "disaster risk reduction gender sensitive in technical, political, social, developmental and humanitarian processes" (para. 1), urges humanitarian processes to "develop a disaster contingency plan based on the results of a gender sensitive vulnerably analysis and risk assessment to address the different needs and concerns between men and women during emergency caused by natural hazards" (point 17). Bad sea or weather conditions should be therefore considered as more dangerous for particular segments of the population labeled as vulnerable from above. And, during humanitarian processes, women and men are represented as differently exposed to risk in front of natural dangers.

How has this international and general framework been utilized by hegemonic narratives with the arrival of the *crisis*? In 2016, to explain the violence of the sea and urge the European Member States to act, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi appealed to these gendered and ideological representations to evoke the compassion of his audience:

Take for example Fatima, who fled the war in Syria. She was found in a state of shock in the port of the Greek island of Samos. She was severely traumatized and injured. She had

suffered violence at the hands of the man she had been travelling with. She was taken to a

hospital for treatment and there she revealed that her husband had entrusted her and their

young daughter to a man she did not know to get her to a safe country in Europe [...]. He

abused Fatima and denied her direct contact with her husband. Fatima is just one of

thousands of women and girls who are making the journey on their own, fleeing violence

and persecution only to face a similar ordeal on their way to Europe, a place where they

had hoped and expected to find sanctuary. (Grandi, 2016, para. 6-7)

Ticktin (2011) unpacks the dynamics through which certain sufferings are more credible

than others. According to the author, the asylum system is made to reproduce a certain model of

perfect refuginess. Some stories are more suitable than others to be believed. Their credibility,

and thus the whole asylum process, depends on how they fit in the mainstream stereotypes about

the inferiority and wrongness of the Other's culture, and therefore on how they produce

compassion.

For example, the author writes that "activists fighting for immigrant women's rights

found themselves in the uncomfortable position of searching for evidence of gendered forms of

violence, like rape or forced marriage, as these became the most significant factors by which one

could prove one's humanity worthy of humanitarian exception" (pp. 2-3). Gendered response to

emergency situations is, for example, often connected to the concept of Gender-Based Violence

(GBV), which is internationally defined as the violence directed to an individual due to their sex

or gender identity, with extreme generalization.[25] It is not a coincidence that Grandi (2016) refers

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[25] For example, see the CARE Emergency Toolkit (Care Emergency Toolkit [CET], n. d.), which collects
information about emergency response and humanitarian aid, guidelines, and suggestions. Without any context-
specific reference, CARE suggests that in general it is always true that "in an emergency GBV is exacerbated, and
vulnerabilities and risk increase. Preventing and responding to GBV in emergencies is a life-saving activity that
requires a prioritised response and is mandatory in CARE programming" (No. 3.D).

to a woman to provoke compassion for people at sea. And it is not just a coincidence that he

mentions the abuses Fatima dealt with before crossing and her story as a survivor of GBV to talk

about migrants' experience in the Mediterranean.

It is not that Fatima's story has not to do with many other women's stories. Rather, it

surely has. However, the aim of this paper is to visibilize the way her *before* Europe experience

has been instrumentalized by governmental discourses to create gendered narratives about the

sea search and the rescue. I suggest that Fatima's story of violence perfectly matches with the

preconceived idea that the Western world has about the non-Western world. I also suggest the

sea represents for Grandi (2016) the perfect site where Europe finally has the moral duty of

appearing wherever she needs to be saved from the Other men as she has put herself in the hands

of natural hazard to run away from him and reach the land of the civilized.

On the North Shore of Lesvos, the rescue procedures establish that, when possible,

women and children have to be taken on board first. In 2015, Linardi reported that her Sea

Watch (SW) crew had "rescued over fifty people from an overcrowded, sinking rubber boat,

which has been found by the SW boat drifting and embarking water. The crew embarked twenty

people, giving priority to children and women" (Linardi, 2015-2016, No. 61, para. 2).

Volunteers and NGOs, being completely devoted to saving lives and working for that

purpose, adapt each aspect of their operations to arrivals' needs.[26] This also has a different

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[26] For instance, LHR's operations include all kinds of activities that can end up in very dangerous situations for
inexperienced –mostly very young– volunteers. LHR's workers spot the horizon almost 24 hours per day looking for
boats at sea; assist with landings in very different scenarios (including very rocky and dangerous areas);
communicate with search and rescue boats from the spotting point, guiding them toward the boats in question;
manage the transit camp in the area; and ultimately get ready for all kinds of unexpected events and circumstances
such as encountering medical cases among the arrivals and knowing how to manage them. The tension and the high
level of stress characterizing the emergency response field selects people working in it. Where needed, NGOs hire
highly qualified and specialized staff. But in general, people accepting to volunteer under intense and traumatic
circumstances are highly motivated. Therefore, NGOs' operations at the border totally depend on arrivals' needs,
which is also the reason why, for instance in the context of Lesvos, they are also the most proficient in rescuing and
are needed by authorities.

gendered impact on people as compared with authorities' strict differentiation between women

seen as victims and men as smugglers, opportunists of NGOs practices, enemies.

For instance, NGOs on the North shore of Lesvos train volunteers to simply "prioritize

the rescue effort depending on the perceived needs of each individual" (Lighthouse Relief

[LHR], 2017, para. 9) to guarantee that, after people are safely on dry land, "we attend to the

needs of each casualty. As they disembark from the rescue boat, the landing coordinator carries

out a quick assessment of each person's needs and injuries" (para. 11). Also, the priority during

operations is to guarantee that people "feel safe and welcomed" (para. 10) and "that parents are

not separated from their children" (para. 10). There is no assumption that the most vulnerable,

the most caring, the most injured after crossing at sea will be women.

Gendered rescue procedures are, instead, established by state authorities and Frontex. For

instance, in 2016, Linardi reported that Frontex had "boarded women and children and one dead

woman. We passed them blankets and water. We then escorted the men left on the boat to the

beach. Engine was stopping all the time but they finally made it" (No. 65, para. 5). Therefore, I

argue, gendered rescue procedures are a fundamental aspect of how the border materializes by

solidifying the sea and moving throughout the water. They allow the state to monopolize the

decision about who lives and who dies on the basis of ideological representations that relieve

Europe of any responsibility for the deaths. Indeed, the decision to save the feminized and

vulnerable Other first is seen as an ethical act of sufficient mercy and justice.

3.4   Producing Gendered Vulnerability at Sea

Not only do preconceptions about the feminized Other's vulnerability produce the

masculine enforcement of the mobile and pervasive border. These epistemological and material

dimensions of the border interact with and create each other, producing gendered repercussions on racialized bodies that are essential for the state. As I explained earlier, identities undergo a process of negotiation at the border, which needs to confront the material obstacle of the Other in a way that can reconfirm the subject's identity (Brambilla, 2015). For this reason, I argue, by reproducing women's representations as the vulnerable Other, the border seeks to create the conditions for and perpetuate their vulnerability.

While exploring how securitization impacts women's experiences in transit, Gerard and Pickering (2014) also interviewed some women about their journey at sea. Some of them described their transit as safe. Others told them the main troubles they had during their trips were linked to mechanical and navigational failings, the overcrowded space, and interceptions by other vessels. Women's exposure to harm during their transit at sea had mostly to do with logistical and practical issues, such as a shortage of fuel or the reluctance of some vessels to interact with their boats, which have to do with the enforcement of the border and with the criminalization of non-official rescue, not with the sea or their gender.

On the other hand, other women felt "at the bottom of the social hierarchy on these journeys" (Gerard & Pickering, 2014, p. 352) at sea. Indeed, women are reportedly more traumatized than men by the experience of crossing, but in these cases gendered dangers come from smugglers as much as from authorities and border enforcement (Freedman, 2016), not from the sea itself. Boats are overcrowded, due to smugglers' interest in profiting and filling them as much as possible, and passengers are packed in ways that stabilize them. Usually, women sit in the middle of the boat while men usually sit on the inflatable tubes on the sides of the rubber dinghy. As the *Alarm Phone* (2018) reports, "it is in the middle of the boats where sea water and fuel gather the most, creating a toxic mixture that burns their skin and often causes grave

injuries. There, they are also more at risk of being trampled and suffocated when panic breaks out on board" (para. 5).

Women along with other 'vulnerable' people onboard are often instrumentalized to persuade authorities and non-official vessels to rescue passengers. For example, the *Independent* reported that smugglers could throw pregnant women and children into the sea and leave them to drown to force merchant vessels to take migrants ashore (Dearden, 2015). Most of the time, people who are generally understood as the vulnerable are the ones who move the rescuer's compassion the most and, therefore, they need to play (or they are forced to play) the role of the vulnerable to be saved.

In addition, the *Alarm Phone* (2018) reported that women at sea are more vulnerable because they are often "pregnant, which increases the risk of dehydration, or they hold the responsibility to care for young children that travel with them" (para. 5). It is true that pregnant women are at high risk of dehydration, and for them being at sea might be particularly dangerous, depending on how long the journey lasts. However, pregnancy and the act of caring for children are often represented as correlated factors around caring femininity. Their correlation proves women's vulnerability and mainstream representations tend to use them as a way of dichotomizing women and men's experiences without any causal contextualization. Indeed, women often travel with their family and their male partners, but men are more likely to be separated from their families by authorities or smugglers. This also happens for pregnant women, who therefore have to deal with the pregnancy by themselves after their partners "get arrested or are forced to work for traffickers" (Grotti et al., 2018, p. 6). Women are not more likely to carry children than men because their culture is male-dominated *a priori,* but because oftentimes systemic dynamics of oppression at the border do not give them other choice.

Women's experiences at sea depend on many man-made factors, which shape their vulnerability in accordance with gendered and racialized preconceptions, as opposed to essentialist claims about women's biological or cultural vulnerability to the sea. Indeed, conditions at sea do not depend only on the days spent at sea. As a woman declared to the UNHCR, people on board of her boat "were malnourished [...]. That was a consequence of the long time we had spent in the traffickers' hangars in Libya." (Rotunno, 2019, para. 3). She declared that the journey itself was terrifying due to the bad conditions smugglers had given them the boat. "The wooden boat was stranded at sea off Libya for two days. The engine broke. There was water leaking inside the boat. The waves were so strong" (para. 9). Nevertheless, this woman voluntarily decided to face them. "We were terrified but we were coming from hell. We were not afraid" (para. 9), she said.

Her freedom of movement and decision was erased by the border instead. According to her, the journey's worst aspect was that "Europe didn't want us. Then we started fearing we could be sent back to hell: Libya" (para. 11). This fear was tangible and the probability to be sent back was real, and gendered. In Libya, women undergo sexual violence, harassment, and slavery and are particularly subjected to human trafficking and forced prostitution due to their sex.[27]

On October 28th, 2015, a boat sank in European waters after crossing the Greek border toward Lesvos, and at least 43 people drowned in such a narrow strait of water, so heavily patrolled. As FA (2020) reports, the incident was internationally reported by the media as a successful rescue operation of Frontex and HCG.

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[27] For example, De Simone (2017) investigated the raising trafficking of underaged Nigerian girls. From Nigeria, they are brought to Libya, where they undergo threats and extreme violence and are forced by smugglers to get into asylum-seekers' boats, undertake the journey at sea toward Italy, and get into forced prostitution there.

FA reconstructed the events through the help of a Syrian woman, Amel Alzakout, who survived the shipwreck and had recorded the journey with a waterproof camera, and the testimonies of some of the people (NGOs' rescuers, journalists, and locals) who witnessed the scene. According to the FA's reconstruction, once the boat began sinking within European waters, it kept slowly drifting toward Lesvos for hours. Although Greece and the European Union are legally responsible for sea search and rescue, none of the authority vessels on-site had the capacity to perform a rescue, and their incompetence was deadly to those who went missing.

Both the HCG and the Norwegian Frontex vessels on the scene were fast patrol boats, not equipped to embark people. For instance, both of them had very high sides, steep for people to climb while immersed in the water. Moreover, the investigation reports that the officers themselves were not trained to perform rescue: they did not throw rafts at people, they could not perform Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), and they kept on maneuvering their vessels in a very dangerous way for people in the crowded water.

Adding to the situation, an authority helicopter joined the rescue. According to FA's sources, it arrived on the scene with the only purpose of recording the events and ended up exacerbating wind, waves, and people's panic. Amel told FA that people in the water were in fact getting very tired from exertion and stress. She saw many letting go of the object they were holding. Many people drifted away and went lost. Amel was also very close to giving up as well when she got rescued, two hours and a half after the shipwreck had begun.

The NGO Proactiva Open Arms's crew had joined the scene with their rescue rib, which allowed them to maneuver easily among people in the water, easily embark people on board thanks to their specific vessel, and practice CPR in place of authorities. According to Amel, Proactiva Open Arms volunteers "were moving fast, picking up children from their parents'

hands and bringing them to safety. They were around us all the time and going back and forth. It gave us hope to see them rescuing." (FA, 2020, 14:06).

Although Proactiva Open Arms was the only actor on the scene that seems to have given "hope" (14:15) to Amel, authorities ended up erasing volunteers' contributions and taking credits for the people that had survived. According to FA, the presence of proficient civil actors made authorities' incompetence in performing rescue "harder to identify" (19:55).

On the same day, Frontex (2015) declared that the Norwegian Frontex vessel had played a "key role in the rescue of hundreds of people off Lesbos" (para. 1). Reportedly, "we saw many casualties in the sea. We looked for signs of life and saved as many as we could. The crew made an enormous effort that saved dozens of people" (para. 3), the commander of the Norwegian vessel said. The alleged heroism of the Norwegian crew was also praised, for instance, by the *Norwegian National Criminal Investigation Service* (Kripos), that tweeted on the following day: "they managed to save 122 children. Multiple children were critically cold. Today, they are going out again" (Kripos, 2015). The more at-risk people's lives and the more vulnerable the rescued (women, freezing children, etc.), the more heroic the rescuer becomes.

As Roberto E. Barrios (2017) reveals, the framework of *crisis* is often used to divert attention away from the causes of systematic malfunctions and, consequently, from questions of accountability. Through the concept of *crisis*, mainstream narratives succeed in fact in moving the focus in terms of temporality: the present of the *crisis* is detached from its past causes and from the process that brought to it and, therefore, reduced to discourses about resilience and vulnerability (Barrios, 2017).

As long as migration to Europe is addressed as a humanitarian and unpredictable issue, and the sea is seen as the main agent that puts people's lives at risk, not only will the political

and colonial dynamics behind it remain hidden, but their violence will continue undisturbed. Developmental approaches, such as the ones I examined above, put outsized focus on the concepts of vulnerability and resilience. They search for any constant that could generalize, predict, and manage people's capability of surviving a situation. This also includes their swimming skills, for example. However, these approaches hide the structural dynamics of power that create the dangerous situation itself. I also suggest that these approaches create a framework that legitimizes the state violence. Therefore, finding who is more vulnerable and who is more resilient to the natural element of water is fundamental for the state to perpetuate it.

According to Eithne Luibhéid (2002), not only does the border control people's identity but it also has the power of shaping it. Luibhéid specifically talks about women's sexuality, but she explores how immigration apparatuses exercise their power over individuals and have profound long-term impacts over their lives, their behaviors, and their performances of social normativity (Luibhéid, 2002). As Anzaldúa (2012) explores throughout her experience, the border is "her home / this thin edge of / barbwire" (p. 35).

Gendered misrepresentations of migrants crossing the sea influence the way in which the border is enforced by the state and, consequently, they also influence the way people shape their identities depending on that moment. Vicki Squire (2017) delves deeper into this process. The enforcement of sovereignty through specific procedures that can spatially move the border throughout the sea and land is empowered by the masculine performances of authorities and the muscularization of their behaviors. At the border, White –most of the time male– European agents monopolize the action at the border through surveillance and terror. According to the author, not only are they in charge of securing the areas of operation, but they also perform the role of the White strong man saving the vulnerable, helpless, powerless, and feminized Other in

need of rescue from the sea. Squire and Luibhéid (2002) converge in the explanation that Anzaldúa (2012) offers of the border and its power of totalizing the lives and the experiences of the undocumented who crossed it. They indeed seem to agree that, by seeing women as particularly vulnerable people to rescue –for all the reasons I summed up above–, border patrol forces seek to perpetuate and produce their vulnerability.

It is unclear why, according to Amel, the big and cumbersome authority vessels were "very close to us but standing still. We didn't understand why they were not helping us [...]. The crew seemed unable to cope with such challenging circumstances" (FA, 2020, 15:20). Frontex is officially meant for border patrolling and rescue, but concretely works only for the first purpose. During interceptions at sea, the European agency shows off its 'good savior' facade to the rescue of the vulnerable, although, as we hear from Amel's story, Frontex was the very same actor that was "not doing anything, except making us feel more furious and helpless." (15:25) The humanitarianism of the border works to humiliate people and exacerbate their vulnerability to the natural element of the sea. Therefore, producing their vulnerability is functional to rescue them afterward.

As Bilgiç (2018b) points out, the White savior narrative is oftentimes seen in contradiction with the violent autoimmune reaction of the body politic that violates and kills migrants on their way to Europe. I argue that this discrepancy can be absorbed by the presence of the sea. Indeed, its geographical features, behind which the state can carry the two gendered narratives –on the one hand, a feminized and victimized Other that needs to be saved; on the other, a masculine and dangerous one– forward alongside. As David Newman and Anssi Paasi (1998) write, "borders provide one of the most explicit manifestations of the large-scale connection between politics and geography" (p. 186).

The number of people crossing the Mediterranean sea before 2015 was already high, as it was also the number of people dying during their trip, although back then, this was not considered to be a *crisis*. The *crisis* exploded instead in 2015, when Alan Kurdi's family decided to make the illegal crossing toward Kos, a Greek island. Alan Kurdi's mother was reportedly scared of being on the open sea, and the conditions in which they would have had to cross to escape authorities were dangerous. They had to turn to a smuggler, who surely did not want to be nabbed by authorities and wanted to make as much profit as possible out of their journey. The smuggler arranged therefore, as it had normally happened before, to put sixteen people on a boat with a maximum capacity of eight, did not give them lifejackets, and made them leave from an isolated beach at night, which made people scream and panic even more. Turkey was not a safe country for Alan Kurdi's family, and they wanted to join the rest of their family in Canada. As *The Guardian* (2015) reported, they had no other choice but to face the sea in those conditions to leave the country since they had been refused both refuge in Canada and an exit visa by Turkey.

The death of Alan Kurdi, seen in the picture as a vulnerable child washed away by the violence of the waves, called Europe to action since the continent could not sit back while the sea was killing the helpless. In the Western world, his and his mother's deaths were a problem of indifference to the suffering of the helpless, not of state responsibility for giving people no other choice but being helpless.

It did not matter that Alan Kurdi's father had blamed Canada from the beginning for his family's destruction, as the Donnelly and The Canadian Press (2015) reported, European leaders responded to this event by showing compassion for the deaths as they were temporarily detached from the racialized dynamics at their cause. While many media condemned the child's father for putting his family in a dangerous situation, countries such as the UK, France, and Germany

promised to let large amounts of helpless migrants in their territory after their journeys at sea (Khan, 2015). Germany, for instance, announced that there were "no limits on the number of asylum seekers" they will take in. "As a strong, economically healthy country we have the strength to do what is necessary," Angela Merkel said (*Germany's Angela Merkel says no numbers limits to right to asylum*, 2015, para. 4).

However, not even ten days later, after migrants began massively arriving in Germany by land, Germany suspended trains from Austria and announced that it was "at the limit of its capabilities" (McGuinness, 2015, para. 3). What changed in such a short period? One year later, in 2016, the European Union found through the EU-Turkey agreement a moral solution to the suffering and to the *crisis,* whose emergency regime ultimately continued: preventing migrants from risking their lives at sea.

SECTION 4
CONCLUSION

At sea, all racialized bodies are vulnerable (Squire, 2017) to the structural violence of the mobile and pervasive border. There, their identities undertake a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction as the Other (Anzaldúa, 2012). The state monopoly of the border and its functional implementation for the exercise of sovereignty outside the rule of law (Butler, 2003) leave racialized bodies in a space of unruly violence where they are suspended between life and death. In the state of exception, the body politic decides which kind of subject "must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintains certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (Butler, 2003, pp. XIV-XV).

In this paper, I argued that migrants' essentialistic and gendered representations are essential for the state to justify the way he enforces the border and, consequently, construct his identity as opposed to the Other. With the alleged *refugee crisis,* the element of the sea has been fundamental for Europe in this sense. Indeed, the sea's material features allow the state to maximize the effects of his approach to migration.

As I developed my analysis, there are three dialectic dimensions that co-create this dynamic process: the uncontrollability of the sea and its sites of access, the consequential *solidification* of the Mediterranean through territorial criteria, and the gendered epistemology providing legitimation for the state's violence and preservation for his identity. Through this process, the state ultimately turns the sea into a massive suspensive area where he controls how to react and protect his immunity: applying gendered preconceptions about the Other, he monopolizes the decision to save who deserves to live and to not be responsible for the bodies that deserve to die.

Where do we begin challenging the mainstream narratives that legitimize and perpetuate these dynamics? As Nguyễn (2017) points out, the ocean is made out of salt and water. Salt is used in many processes for preservation as it crystallizes the matter and drains unwanted experiences of life, such as bacteria. At the same time, it suspends time for the system and guarantees the survival of the body to foreign invasion by external forms of life. I see the salty feature of the Mediterranean in the *solidifying* feature of the border, which immobilizes and suspends racialized bodies. As I explained in the section about the *solid* sea, the border pervades water through territorial criteria, which deny migrants any freedom of movement and make them able to "neither moving forward nor returning back" (Nguyễn 2017, p. 98).

However, as I argued in the section about the uncontrollability of the sea, the fluidity of water highlights migrants' freedom and determination to face their journeys and navigate waves. Their movement destabilizes the national order and penetrates the body politic's membrane (Esposito, 2008) uncontrollably, creating new horizons of possibility. Following the dynamic duality of the sea proposed by Nguyễn (2017), there are two interrelated dimensions in which I suggest that further investigation can go.

First, the salty features of the border, which seeks to control and totalize the state membrane by *solidifying* the sea, moving throughout water, and epistemologically justifying his violence while preserving his identity. Instead of focusing on vulnerability, which is produced by the body politic through gendered preconceptions, I suggest that further investigation into the relationship between gender, the sea, and the border departs from the awareness that the sea does not discriminate bodies for their gender, their race, and their social statuses. I suggest that further investigation should focus on how the sea is instead instrumentalized as a legitimization for

structural violence through epistemological constructions and how gendered hegemonic

narratives materially produce the conditions for their own existence.

Second, the possibilities opened by the fluidity of waves. As we saw in Brambilla (2015),

borderscapes are the places where predefined hegemonic narratives get challenged by the

entrance of the stranger, get negotiated with him, and are re-elaborated in order to re-establish

the preconceived ideology about the subject. In *Rethinking Borders, Violence and Conflict: From*

Sovereign Power to Borderscapes as Sites of Struggles, Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones

(2020) follow up on this concept and open new possibilities to deconstruct Western

epistemologies and the consequential violent but legitimate reaction of the state by departing

from embodied stories of structural violence. At sea, the border becomes extremely mobile and

its enforcement strictly depends on the relation between racialized bodies and authorities. This

encounter is the site where migrants get reduced to preconceptions, yet continue to struggle.

Although the uncontrollability of the sites of access to his territory is fundamental for the

state to enforce securitization *dispositifs*, it is true that it continues to represent a challenge to the

stability of the border (Perera, 2013). In this sense, it could be useful to rethink the term *crisis.*

Roitman (n.d.) makes clear that the term *crisis* also opens up new paths for problematization. As

she points out, *crisis* marks a present moment that breaks the temporal continuity between the

past and the future and creates the possibility of producing new knowledge. While the *refugee*

crisis has been a tool of epistemological legitimization of mainstream narratives, it could also be

turned upside down as the blind spot where to produce the "moment of truth" (para. 41), observe

the malfunctioning of structural injustice, and visibilize the narratives of the bodies that bared

witness.

As I mentioned earlier, the border instrumentalizes the indefiniteness of the sea to invisibilize women behind preconceived and gendered ideas about vulnerability. As Giorgia Linardi says, "we will never know what her name was, where she was from, why she was there" (*L'Assedio,* 2019, 0:50). However, these stories exist and are rich in diversity and potential because of the indefiniteness of the sea itself.

Gangopadhyay (2017) describes, for example, how the fluidity of water gives women the chance to restore a certain degree of liberation. According to the author, the suspension they live at sea makes it possible for them to erase the oppression of the past and open unrevealed futurities. "Life on the ship is compared to rebirth—a chance at a new life" (p. 58), she says.

People on law-quality boats throw overboard everything that may represent an unnecessary weight. In the same way, they also throw overboard the gendered, racial, classist, and caste differences and begin re-shaping their identities based on the new-discovered bond with the group they share a common totalizing experience with. Gangopadhyay sees this group of people, who under other circumstances were unlikely to get to know each other, as formed by the shared experience of displacement and escape from past forms of oppression. Within this "relationship of the ship" (p. 60), women on board might experience the opening of unexpected possibilities for their future and renovate their identities through solidarity and the reciprocal support of their counterparts.

The possibility opened by Gangopadhyay does not differ that much from Perera's (2013) attempt to theorize people's navigating at sea as an unpredictable, uncontrollable, and fluid storyline of possibilities. "The sites of new life-affirming relations, practices, poetics and politics" (p. 78), Perera writes in her conclusion, "they are injunctions to hope" (p. 78). It is in the indefiniteness of the water, along with embodied narratives challenging hegemonic

representations, that new possibilities for new considerations on the borderland could arise (Perera, 2013).

Anzaldúa (2012) urges feminists to decentralize the focus of analysis from the state to the body and use a bottom-up approach. Anzaldúa explores how the borderland resides in women's identities as it exercises its violence not only in terms of temporality and spatiality but also in terms of social and psychological dynamics. The border has the power of perpetuating and reproducing itself in a long-term process through social exclusion and stigmatization but also psychological trauma and identities' reconstruction departing from it.

Far from being a monolithic, passive, and vulnerable object in the hands of authorities, women challenge hegemonic narratives through the diversity of their embodied experiences and are testimonies of state violence. Visibilizing their stories, their agency, their wishes, their fears, their denouncement of the state violence at sea could open new paths toward further questions about accountability and, ultimately, hope.

As A. Young (1994) highlights, women's experiences are not predefined by their sex and "their decisions regarding flight and resettlement are very context-specific. So, too, is the manner in which refugee women learn to adapt to very uncertain and fluid circumstances" (p. 124). Many pregnant women decide to risk their lives at sea, sometimes giving birth on overcrowded boats, sometimes by themselves. Their experience is still represented for its condition of vulnerability, but has not been explored in its extent of freedom, agency, and hope. I am not arguing that all women's stories are powerful and successful. I am instead arguing that women's stories are diverse and alternative to the monolithic representation that hegemonic narratives produce.

An emblematic example of the diversity of women's stories is Doaa's. She is a nineteen-year-old Syrian woman who survived a shipwreck in the Aegean although she did not know how to swim (Fleming, 2015). Many of her fellow passengers did not survive, and this had little to do with their gender. Among them, a woman who gave her her daughter; a man who gave her his granddaughter, and gave up his hold drifting away; and her partner, Bassem, who died before her eyes.

The story of Sarah and Yusra Mardini (Karas & Zavallis, 2016) is also fascinating and completely deconstructs the state's essentialistic ideology on women and their rescue. While international guidelines and procedures see non-Western women as disadvantaged at sea *a priori,* Sarah and Yusra are Syrian sisters who saved the passengers of their boat while crossing the Aegean toward Lesvos. As often happens, the engine of the boat had stopped working and the boat had started taking on water. Sarah and Yusra were taught how to swim in Syria, where they were professional swimmers. When the boat started drifting, they lowered themselves into the water, pushing the dinghy forward for 3 hours. "We weren't scared because we were together" (para. 12), Sarah said. "When we got to the shore, everyone was saying thank you to us" (p.14), but Sarah would reply that "we are swimmers, I'm a lifeguard. This is our job. It's just natural for us to do this" (para. 14). Along with Sarah, Yusra, Doaa, there are countless other women whose stories were erased in the midst of waves: they need to be told.

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