

## Chapter 5

# «Geographical objects, symbolic subjects». Islands and ships as spaces of (im)mobility

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### Abstract

Islands have historically served as spaces of exclusion for marginalized groups. Today, they also function as migrant detention zones, becoming critical border spaces. In the Mediterranean, islands such as Lampedusa play a central role in the EU's migration management. The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak accelerated and transformed some of the processes involving migration policies. In April 2020, Italy began using cruise ships and ferries as 'quarantine ships' for migrants. Scholars interpret these ships as tools of border externalization and bio-political control, yet often overlook the spatial symbolism of the ships themselves and their overlap with the island spaces. Both islands and ships share defined, isolating boundaries and can serve as places of confinement, movement, or escape. This paper explores the material and metaphorical parallels between islands and ships as devices of migration control. Drawing on past and current research, media, institutional reports, and humanitarian accounts, it examines how these spaces function within broader systems of exclusion and border governance.

Keywords: Islands, quarantine ships, migration, mobility, detention, Covid-19.

### Riassunto

Le isole sono state storicamente spazi di esclusione per i gruppi emarginati. Oggi funzionano anche come zone di detenzione dei migranti, diventando spazi critici di confine. Nel Mediterraneo, isole come Lampedusa svolgono un ruolo centrale nella gestione della migrazione da parte dell'UE. L'epidemia di Covid-19 ha accelerato e trasformato alcuni dei processi che coinvolgono le politiche migratorie, tanto che nell'aprile 2020, l'Italia ha iniziato a utilizzare le navi da crociera e i traghetti come navi da quarantena per i migranti. Diverse ricerche hanno interpretato l'uso di queste navi come strumenti di esternalizzazione dei confini e di controllo biopolitico, trascurando il simbolismo spaziale delle navi stesse e la loro sovrapposizione con gli spazi insulari. Sia le isole che le navi condividono la natura di spazi 'naturalmente' definiti e confinabili e possono servire come luoghi di confinamento, passaggio o fuga. Questo lavoro esplora i parallelismi materiali e me-

taforici tra isole e navi come strumenti di controllo della migrazione. Attingendo a ricerche passate e attuali, ai media, ai rapporti istituzionali e ai resoconti umanitari, esamina come questi spazi funzionino all'interno di sistemi più ampi di esclusione e di governance dei confini.

Parole chiave: Isole, navi quarantena, migrazioni, mobilità, detenzione, Covid-19.

## 1. Introduction

Islands have long served as spaces of detention and immobilisation, both historically and in contemporary contexts (Anderson, 2018; Mountz, 2020). Their inherent peripherality and clearly defined boundaries make them strategic sites for the exercise of sovereign power, enabling national and supranational entities to either amplify the visibility of these spaces or render them liminal and invisible (Mountz, 2015a). This role is exemplified by numerous cases in Italy's recent past and present, including Lipari, Ustica, Favignana, the Tremiti Islands, Santo Stefano, Ventotene, Pianosa, Asinara, Capraia, Nisida, Gorgona, Lampedusa, and Pantelleria. These islands have been utilized to detain both national and international prisoners, and in the present day, islands globally are increasingly employed as border zones for the containment of migrants, transforming them into critical sites of exclusion and control.

Similarly, vessels – such as boats, ships, and barges – have historically functioned as spaces of (im)mobile confinement, sharing with islands a reliance on 'natural' or artificially constructed boundaries that facilitate isolation. The rigid, well-defined borders of a ship can serve a parallel purpose, creating spaces of reclusion and detention. Historical examples abound, from the British prison hulks of the 18th century, which remained in use until 2006, to the prison ships employed under Pinochet's regime in Chile and the floating detention facilities in the United States, such as the vessel operational near Rikers Island since 1992. Moreover, the transportation of convicts was itself a form of punishment for centuries and «by the nineteenth century, in numerous global contexts, penal transportation blended convict mobility with carceral immobility» (Anderson, 2018: 3; see also Gill *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, even the slave trade ships, though not prisons in the strictest sense, represent a historical precursor to the contemporary use of vessels in the containment of marginalized and exploitable populations, connecting to the use of mobility as a form of punishment through their colonial nature.

Mediterranean islands, such as Lampedusa or Lesvos, are exemplary sites of migrants' management, control and detention. This is due, on the one hand, on their position within the context of the Mediterranean Sea; on the other, it is strictly related to the management of migration by the

European Union. Moreover, the European borderscape is constantly evolving, in particular at times of crises. The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak accelerated and transformed some of the processes involving migration policies. In spring 2020, Italy introduced two policies to block non-EU migrants arriving by sea: closing ports to search-and-rescue (SAR) operations and using quarantine ships for migrants. While the port closure was short-lived, quarantine ships became a key border security measure (Montagna, 2023). In particular, in April 2020, the Italian government established the use of cruise ships and ferries (*Grandi Navi Veloci*) as quarantine ships for immigrants arriving in Italy<sup>1</sup>. This is not the first time that these «floating island» or «floating prisons» (Baldacchino, 2021: 2), would be used to contain migrants<sup>2</sup>: the most recent previous attempt was made in 2016.

Scholars have focused on the use of these ships as forms of externalization of the border, the application of bio-political power, as floating hotspots, or as hygienic borders (Spada, 2021; Tazzioli, Stierl, 2021; Giacomelli, Walker, 2022; Montagna, 2023), suggesting a certain continuity within the migration management system but missing to identify the role played by geographical space, both materially and symbolically. Concrete uses and metaphoric meaning allow to draw some connections between ships and islands: they are spatially defined by ‘natural’ apparently clear and defined boundaries, which can be, by a specific will, turned into isolating and reclusion spaces. The artificial well-defined boundaries of a ship can play a similar role. They are used as spaces of isolation, of movement, as spaces to occupy or conquer, as extra-territorial spaces, and as idyllic tourist destinations. From this perspective, some continuities and discontinuities between islands and quarantine ships can be drawn.

These connections are further underscored by their frequent

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<sup>1</sup> By mid-September 2020, Italy had seven such ships, managed by the Italian Red Cross and stationed near critical areas such as Lampedusa, to prevent COVID-19-positive migrants from entering. Over time, the ships’ use expanded to include migrants arriving independently and, briefly, those already in the reception system (Montagna, 2023). First, the ships “Rubattino” and “Moby Zaza” were used; in the following months, the Ministry of the Interior also made use of other ships, including the “Azzurra”, the “Allegra”, the “Splendid,” the “Rhapsody,” the “Excellent” and the “Suprema”, the “Aurelia” and the “Adriatic” (ASGI, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, during the same period, both the Maltese and Greek governments deployed ships for the same goal (Baldacchino, 2021).

association in both practice and metaphor. Prison ships were often moored at island docks, adjacent to terrestrial detention facilities, while terms such as floating islands<sup>3</sup> and floating prisons highlight their conceptual overlap. These associations are not merely incidental but reflect deeper structural and symbolic linkages that warrant further exploration.

The intersections between islands, ships, and prisons have been sporadically addressed – often metaphorically – in the literature, though often underexplored. Foucault's (1977) concept of the carceral archipelago<sup>4</sup> and Edouard Glissant's (1997) reflections on the Antilles, where the figures of the boat, island, and archipelago are deeply intertwined with histories of slavery and postcolonial identity, provide foundational insights. Jude McCulloch (2007) has argued that the island serves as a potent metaphor for the prison, while Allison Mountz (2013, 2014) extends this analogy, suggesting that islands are reproduced in other forms – military bases, bodies, prisons – creating nested spaces of confinement: «Island spaces also show a tendency toward the topological reproduction of the form of the island: bases and prisons on islands become islands within islands; prisons within bases become islands within islands within islands; solitary confinement cells within them islands within islands within islands within islands» (2014: 7). Stratford *et al.* (2011: 116) further complicate this spatial logic, stating that «most islands invariably embrace other islands within their spatial ambit: smaller islands off their coasts; larger islands (mainlands?) to which they belong; and internal islands (of interest, conflict or other assemblages, for instance) that may exist should their boundedness be fractured». This raises the question of whether ships might be conceptualized as floating islands, connected to or existing outside terrestrial islands.

This chapter seeks to build on these foundational connections by examining the island space in relational terms and more specifically the mobilities that revolve around islands and ships as spaces of migrant containment. By exploring the contemporary uses of these geographic objects, the study aims to illuminate the fluid and fragile boundaries that

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<sup>3</sup> Wood (2004) speaks of floating resorts or theme parks referring to cruise ships.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Laura Stoler (2010, p. 130) has demonstrated that, across various disciplinary institutions in Europe and its colonies, 'the carceral archipelago' functioned as «nodes in an imperial network».

define them, while contributing to broader discussions on the spatial politics of migrants' exclusion and detention. Moreover, I aim at defining a broader idea of enforcement archipelago that could consider the use of new devices such as the quarantine ships.

## 2. The island and the ship as a (im)mobile constellation

The idea of islands as static, isolated, dependent and peripheral, is long outdated. Thinking of islands as mobile and relational spaces (Stratford *et al.*, 2011; Pugh, 2013; Malatesta and Cavallo, 2019) has problematised this conception, as well as the image of islands as 'natural' (Malatesta, 2021). Islands are, indeed, fully immersed in the logics of globalization and historically involved with human and non-human mobilities, being spaces encompassing encounter, displacement, and contradiction at present time as well as in the past (Brazzelli, 2012; Sivasundaram, 2013; Bernardie-Thair and Schmoll, 2014; Mountz, 2015b; Anderson, 2018; Giuffrè and Pozzi, 2023; Ruggieri, 2024).

The concept of the archipelago offers significant potential for moving beyond rigid and overused dichotomies – such as land and water, or island and continent/mainland<sup>5</sup> – by emphasizing the dynamism of inter-connections and exchanges archipelagos encompass (Stratford *et al.*, 2011). Stratford *et al.* (2011) further encourage us to examine the intricate networks formed by humans, other living beings, technologies, artifacts, and the environments they collectively inhabit. Following these ideas, Pugh (2013: 10) argues that «thinking with the archipelago foregrounds how island movements are generative and inter-connective spaces of metamorphosis, of material practices, culture and politics». Similarly, Malatesta and Cavallo (2019: 2893) invite us to consider «the sea as a fabric in which the islands are interconnected, with each other and with the continents, as nodes in a network and not monads constrained to the single dimension of an asymmetrical relationship (of the center-periphery type) with the nation-state». They address two types of relationship: one between the island and the mainland, not intended necessarily as the first depending on

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<sup>5</sup> The centre-periphery model can be recalled here (Turco, 1980).

the second. And one between islands, which reveal an archipelagic nature even beyond the canonical geographic belonging to the same archipelago. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the spatial and relational complexities of islands and ships as sites of detention and (im)mobility, where the interplay of confinement, movement, and connection – encompassing various objects and bodies – becomes central both in terms of the politics of the border and for the lived experiences of refugees.

In this work, I draw on the interpretative category of constellation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986; Stratford *et al.*, 2011; Pugh, 2013) to express the complexity of these relationships. A constellation is something that becomes meaningful only when viewed as a whole composed of diverse yet interconnected elements. Constellations are not formed by stars lying on the same plane; they consist of celestial bodies of different ages, positions, and sizes, some of which may have already disappeared yet remain visible, while others may still be invisible. When viewed against the vault of the sky, constellations can be assigned meanings and interpreted as cohesive ensembles. However, when considered in their full complexity and three-dimensional nature, they reveal a diachronic perspective, allowing us to grasp their distinctive characteristics and temporal dimensions, opening to the possibility of catching previously nonvisible further connections.

Building on this metaphor, I imagine a constellation composed of islands as sites of confinement, imprisonment, detention, marginalization, and limbo, as well as spaces of rebellion, breakout, escape, and passage. This ensemble enables us to perceive meanings that might otherwise remain scattered and isolated, offering a framework to explore these phenomena at multiple scales. The constellation metaphor is particularly fruitful because it allows us to consider the long term, looking back into the past to trace historical continuities and forward to envision future possibilities. Moreover, it helps taking into account what is visible and what is not. It underscores the interconnectedness of these sites and their role in shaping the (im)mobilities of refugees, while also highlighting the temporal and spatial dimensions of their experiences. Moreover, it allows to overcome the idea of migration as linear – both in its narrations and materiality – similarly to what Walters, Heller and Pezzani (2022: 11)

suggest with the concept of ‘viapolitics’ which allows «to explore the emergence of forms of policing of mobility in many different places and underline the way they have operated across varying scales that have not followed a linear evolution».

### 3. Migration and human (im)mobilities

The European Union bordering policies have been progressively – though not linearly – moving borders outward, leading to the externalization of border control through practices such as remote detention and the creation of legally ambiguous zones. In this process, several island groups and a small island state have emerged as key points for sea-based migration to Europe: Spain’s Canary Islands, Italy’s Pelagie Islands, Greece’s North Aegean Islands, and Malta. Their significance is tied to their geographic placement and morphology, which makes it impossible to fully secure their borders without extreme measures such as a complete militarization (King, 2009). As a result, these areas have become primary landing points for migrants traveling by boat. While this route is not the most frequently used method of irregular entry into Europe (Trianda-fyllidou and Gropas, 2016), it is undoubtedly the most visible and often sensationalized (Sciurba, 2011; Cuttitta, 2012; De Genova, 2013), besides being one of the deadliest (Last *et al.*, 2017). In recent decades, there has been growing attention on the pathways that channel migrants from Africa and Asia to Europe’s southern coastlines, particularly through the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea routes.

In this context, several factors shape the dynamics of island detentions in the context of EU bordering policies. First, the geographic isolation of islands from mainland territories intensifies the marginalization of migrants, restricting their ability to seek legal assistance or asylum. Second, both state and nonstate actors exercise significant control over migrants, information flows, and the movement of individuals in and out of detention facilities. Finally, the remoteness of these sites often shields detainees from public scrutiny (Mountz, 2011), though they can also become focal points for heightened visibility during periods of perceived ‘crisis’ (Cuttitta, 2012; Di Matteo, 2023). Indeed, islands have emerged as

crucial points of investigation. When viewed through the lens of sovereign power and territoriality, islands serve as spaces where the materiality of the land intersects with exercises of power, making them key sites for understanding the dynamics of migration control (Mountz, 2014; Cuttitta, 2012, 2014; Bernardie-Thair and Schmol, 2014).

When considered in isolation, island detentions may appear ad hoc, circumstantial, or simply a matter of geographic convenience. However, when connected through the concept of constellation, other patterns emerge. These include the political status of islands, their colonial and post-colonial histories, and the interplay of political and economic interests on a national and supranational level. The mobility and immobility of migrants on islands are not solely about physical barriers like fencing or confinement; they also involve active abandonment<sup>6</sup>, filtering, labelling, and sorting of individuals.

As Achtnich (2023: 144) notes:

Stuckness is an important dimension of mobility, particularly because it is polysemic and is an affective state. It differs from waiting, which is a state of hopeful anticipation. [...] Stuckness, therefore, is not about physical immobility or incarceration, although it is often derived from them, but a form of movement that leads to stagnation, to stasis. Equally, experiences of being stuck were about encountering a Europe that was different to what had been anticipated or imagined.

This highlights that mobility is not just about who can move, but also about what kind of movement is permitted, how it is performed, and what consequences it has, reflecting broader power imbalances. Moreover, as argued by Tazzioli (2019: 4) mobility can be considered «as a technology for governing migration» defined also as «governing migrants' mobility through mobility». Similarly, Walters, Heller and Pezzani (2022) reflect on instances where the space-time of travel, and the vehicles enabling it, become contested sites – simultaneously enabling movement and governing it.

The journey between the North African coast (or the Middle East) and Europe is shaped by a complex interplay of policy implementation,

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<sup>6</sup> On the concept of active abandonment see Aru, 2021.

economic interests, chance, and migrants' own agency. These same elements influence the (im)mobilities – both human and non-human – that define the geographic experience of island spaces, prompting new material and symbolic relations within and around these spaces (Di Matteo, 2021, 2023).

With these theoretical frameworks in mind, I aim to explore the mobile materialities and symbolisms of islands and ships through two specific cases: the island of Lampedusa and the quarantine ships used in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The connections between ships and islands extend beyond their shared function as sites of confinement. The (im)mobilities associated with them reveal a wider range of possibilities that illuminate the geographies of power underlying the hindrances and accelerations of movement, as well as the porous and fluid spaces they create.

#### 4. From the 'boat' to the island and back: mapping migrants' (im)mobile constellation in the Mediterranean

This chapter is based on the analysis of data collected throughout my Ph.D. research (2017-2020), media reports, institutional documents, and testimonies from migrants, as well as interviews to humanitarian workers collected between 2023 and 2024.

I will focus on three key stages of the migratory journey: the arrival by boat<sup>7</sup>, the stay on the island and the stay on the quarantine ship. The boat and the ship carry distinct symbolic meanings: the former often represents the perilous journey undertaken by migrants toward Europe, while the latter is associated with rescue operations or quarantine measures. The movements involved, however, do not follow a linear or predictable trajectory and can be disrupted at almost any stage, being emblematic of a broader non-linear migratory path. These changed over the years according to the different policies applied by the States and the EU (Casaglia and Giubilaro, 2020; Di Matteo, 2023). By examining the boat, the island and the ship, we can better understand the complex interplay of power, control, and resistance that defines the contemporary migration

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<sup>7</sup> The term boat is chosen deliberately despite the actual type of vessel involved.

experience. What follows traces an example of what could be one part of a migrant journey through the Mediterranean.

This part of the journey typically begins with the ‘boat’, which serves as the material means of crossing the sea. These boats vary in form, ranging from large fishing vessels to smaller craft and inflatable rubber dinghies. Following this initial phase, migrants may land autonomously, may be intercepted and transferred to vessels operated by the Coast Guard or *Guardia di Finanza*, or to those run by NGOs. Upon arrival at the island – often via the military dock at Molo Favoloro, where they receive a first medical check and are welcomed by volunteers distributing snacks and drinks<sup>8</sup> – a brief bus journey transports migrants to the hotspot. The hotspot can be considered a space that functions as an «island within an island» (Mountz, 2014: 7). This site oscillates between periods of permeability and complete isolation, embodying a form of immobilization. Subsequent stages may involve transfer to a quarantine ship (this happened between 2020 and 2022), where further (im)mobilization occurs, albeit accompanied by internal movements within the ship and the ship’s own mobility. Finally, migrants may reach the mainland, typically Sicily, where they are placed in detention centres (CPR) or other types of reception facilities, usually in a Centres of Rescue and First Reception (CPSA) and then Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS).

In the following pages I will be mapping – through images<sup>9</sup> and words – the complex and often fragmented movements that connect migrants to these diverse spaces and objects, highlighting the interplay between mobility and immobilization at each stage.

#### 4.1. *The boat*

*THE BOAT / mobile / allow migrants’ mobility towards the island; vessel’s mobility as a transport means; migrants’ immobility on the boat during the journey; the boat is sunk, docked, moved on the island; abandoned or mobilised as a symbol around the world.*

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<sup>8</sup> The speed of this process varies according to several conditions. During the Covid-19 pandemic volunteers were not allowed on the dock.

<sup>9</sup> The choice of using images to talk about mobilities related to the boat is also related to the vast diffusion of photos and – as we saw – other types of objects, including souvenirs related to the symbolic object “Boat”.

The primary function of this object is that of transporting people to Europe, often aiming at islands as closest outposts. However, often people are intercepted at sea and transferred on coast guards' ships. At this point the boats are sunk or transported on the island. In Lampedusa over the decades more than one 'boat graveyard' (fig. 1.4) – a place where these boats were disposed – appeared and disappeared. These objects are subject to invisibilisation or hyper-visibilisation according to the moment and political aims, as well as civil society strength and actions. On this regard some of the interviewees of my Ph.D. research stated:

[...] the fact that they put a boat graveyard in a military zone shows that they don't want this phenomenon to be on view to tourists on the island. They try to hide it, even the fact that they removed those that were at the port, and they are not putting them there anymore... Everything has to be confined to this military area where no one can enter (Beatrice, 2019).

[...] in the end they are numbers... you don't see people, even when you know... even when you work with them, sometimes you don't realise. Thus, you see all those boats and think of how many people were sitting there, how many over there, and wonder, did this one make it? Has this person drowned? What happened? And it makes it more real, right? (Valentina, 2019).

Through memory work 'from below', the boats' materiality can be mobilised with a critical approach, as it happened with the opening in Lampedusa of *Porto M* by the collective *Askavusa* (fig. 1.1). The boats were also turned into a source of attraction for a specific type of humanitarian tourism, creating a sort of informal memory place. However, in a second stage – in particular after 2016 – they were institutionalised, through the intervention of the municipality, for example moving the boats and locating them orderly in a visible place, or through art pieces exhibited at the *Museum of Trust and Dialogue of the Mediterranean* (fig 1.5, 1.6). These boats quickly became an international symbol. For example, their wood was used by a local carpenter to create a number of crosses, some to be sold as souvenirs. One of them travelled around the world with Pope Francis (fig. 1.3). Some of these boats were even moved to Venice for the Biennale<sup>10</sup> in 2019.

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<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/partecipants/christoph-b%C3%Bcchel>>.

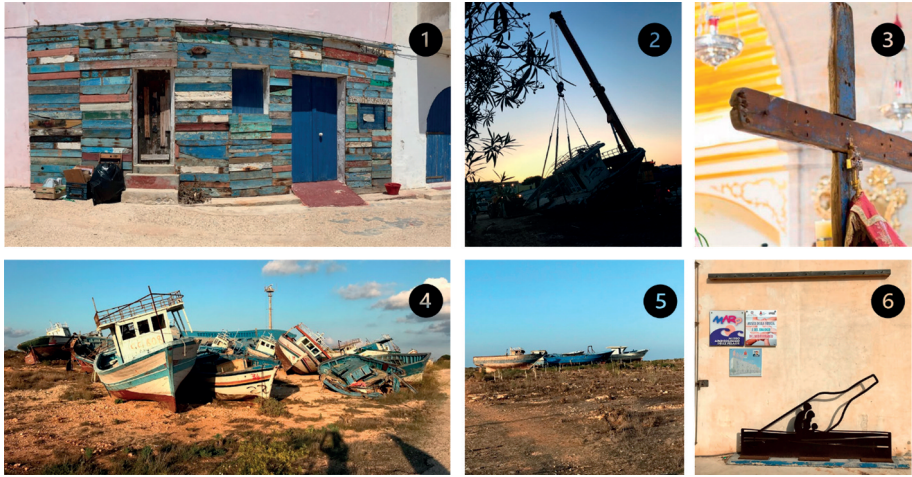


Fig. 1 – The forms that the “boat” takes in relation with Lampedusa. Source: photos 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 are taken by the author. Photo 3: <<https://casaspiritoarti.it/it/testimonianza-di-iosella-cuccu>>.

Finally, the boat can also become a material anchor for returning to Lampedusa, as Zakaria Mohamed Ali does in his short documentary *To whom it may concern* (2013):

When I see the boats, I always have the feeling of remembering – and not wanting to forget – my migration journey. Since I landed on Lampedusa, there are so many people who died at sea of whom we don’t know names, how many they were, who they left, who was waiting for them back in their countries. All of them, what did they dream of? For example, one of our friends Bashir [...] the second time he took the boat, he died at sea».

The boats abandoned here are monuments to those who are looking for freedom. In order to remember all of those people who arrived and make our story better known to whom may be interested».

#### 4.2. *The island*

*THE ISLAND / immobile / migrants’ (im)mobility towards the island; migrants’ mobility on the island; mobility of other subjects related to migration; information (im)mobility; imaginaries; journeys back to the island.*

Zakaria’s words are the connection to the second geographic object

considered in this work: the islands. Let's take a step back, to the moment of the arrival of people to Lampedusa. The drawing by Francesco Piobbichi titled «the dance of the isothermal blankets» (fig 2.5) depicts a woman dancing on the Molo Favalaro pier, and as she dances, she moves and waves a thermal blanket in the air, as if it was a drape. She was there to assist with the arrivals which were intense and numerous that day (hundreds of people arrived, some of them dead). I have been told, by the person depicted, that it had been a long and difficult night. Migrants, volunteers and rescuers were desperate and tired. This is why Silvia decided to grab one of the blankets and started dancing for everyone to create a moment of relief. After surviving one of the most dangerous trips, during which movement became the search for a safe place, at the dock, movement became a way to create connection and a sense of liberation<sup>11</sup>.

After arrival and a first medical check migrants are transferred to the hotspot. This means that the only bit of the island people can see, at least nowadays as controls at the hotspot became more rigid, is the view from a window during the brief trip by bus. Then they are held in the hotspot, in theory for a couple of days, in practice, it depends. The hotspot represents the core of the power exercise on people's mobility. On the one hand because it represents a place of *de facto* detention, on the other hand, because it's where people are filtered: some will go directly to the repatriation space, in a sort of Game of the Goose, while some others are able to go on in their path.

Nicola Angrisano in 2011 filmed a short documentary titled «Lampedusa next stop». This is a video narration of three days in Lampedusa during the period of the *Arab springs* which led thousands of people leaving Tunisia, crossing the sea and landing in Lampedusa. The Italian Government, at the time led by Berlusconi, decided to block migrants on the island, creating an emergency. The island, for the first time in such a manner, turned into a 'confinement' island for migrants and somehow for its own inhabitants as well. This film shows the spectacular construction and political speculation on the so-called 'invasion' and gives voice to people claiming their right to refuge and freedom of movement in the Mediterra-

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<sup>11</sup> About moving bodies, dance and its affective dimension related to space see McCormack (2008).

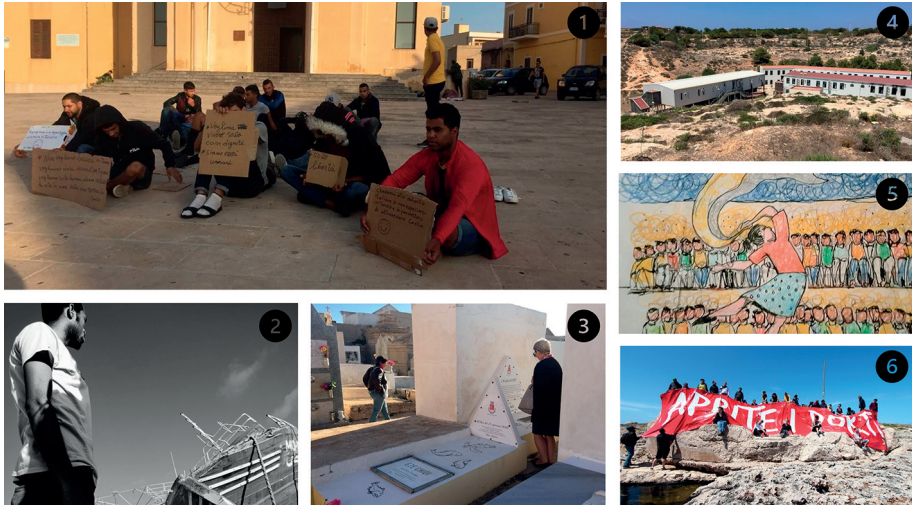


Fig. 2 – The island of Lampedusa and some of its relationships with migration. Source: photos 1, 3, 4, 6 are taken by the author. Photo 2, source: «To whom it may concern» (Zakaria Mohamed Ali, 2013). Photo 5, source: drawing by Francesco Piobbichi.

nean. It documents not only the arrivals but also the overcrowded conditions, protests, and paradoxical mobility within the island due to insufficient infrastructure – a temporary freedom later curtailed by tightening controls in subsequent years.

This documentary reminds us that the growing control and freedom limitation did not stop migrants from appropriating the space of the island for demonstrations and protests. This led to the strengthening of the relations with part of the local population, or with people committed in solidarity movements. In 2019 a group of migrants from Tunisia rebelled against their already written destiny of deportation back to their country (fig. 2.1). Many of them, thanks to their presence at the main square, could connect to lawyers and legal operators which permitted them to apply for asylum and avoid direct deportation. Migrants' presence on the island mobilises a great diversity of solidarity movements, activists, and volunteers.

However, migrants (im)mobilities on Lampedusa are also related to the bodies of those who lose their life at sea. Only a small percentage of those who are found – as most people rest at the bottom of the Mediterranean – can be located at the cemetery of Lampedusa, while most of the

time they are dislocated around Sicily or even further away, very often leaving none or few traces behind.

As it is a cemetery it focuses on those who didn't make it, instead of those who were able to continue their journey, and it's impressive that there are people who tried to give a name to, or a physical space for, these people to rest... for the few among the many who didn't make it (Beatrice, 2018).

Or according to Roberto: «this is a kind of meeting place between worlds which are often represented as conflictual and in opposition». This observation is also significant because it underlines, although not directly, the fact that those deaths are made visible in a 'normal' space, in the everyday space of the local population. The migrants who are alive in Lampedusa are locked in a well-hidden and constantly controlled hotspot, and the representations of the deaths are enclosed in monuments and museums, the cemetery is in this sense – cold comfort – a space which is able to free from these confined enclaves.

Finally, migrants eventually leave the island. Sometimes, however, people go back to Lampedusa, forcibly, when they attempt again the journey to reach Europe if they are pushed back or repatriated. Sometimes the opportunity and the willingness of 'going back' can take different forms. This is the case when Mahamed and Zakaria arrived in Lampedusa from Eritrea and from Somalia in 2008, they briefly recall their story and the willingness to go back to Lampedusa in the short film *Grooving Lampedusa* by Mario Badagliacca. The narrator's voice states: «Mahamed and Zakaria have finally grooved Lampedusa. Traced back the places they saw on arrival. Their story can now be told and remembered. And it's theirs once again» (Badagliacca, 2012). Finally, one of the main occasions for some people to 'go back' is the official commemoration of the anniversary on 3 October, the national day for the victims of immigration. This is an event that mobilises hundreds of people from Italy and from all around Europe (Di Matteo, 2021).

Most of these movements are neither entirely free nor entirely constrained. Moreover, even actions that may appear as 'counter-movements' – such as those by solidarity activists – often remain entangled within the humanitarian discourse, reproducing narratives and practices that are ultimately used against migrants themselves, failing to bring about

profound changes in migration policies (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). However, this does not mean that no change occurs. The ability of individuals to return, to assert their voices and be heard on Lampedusa and beyond, or to create fissures in the surveillance system to advocate for the collective right to movement – as for the Tunisian group – through alliances with other actors, opens up alternative ways of conceptualizing the mobilities centred around the island.

At the same time, studying mobilities around Lampedusa offers an opportunity to explore other connections, such as those between tourism and migration on the island. These connections are sometimes exploited, both economically and symbolically, as in the case of the October 3rd commemorations or the local museum. At other times, they serve as a pretext for implementing stricter surveillance and detention measures. When deemed necessary to ensure the mobility of tourists, Lampedusa can be transformed into a migrant-free island (Vietti, 2019) – a concept further reinforced by efforts to maintain it as a Covid-free zone during the pandemic<sup>12</sup>. This duality highlights the complex interplay between mobility, control, and exclusion on the island.



Fig. 3 – One of the quarantine ships. Source: Matti Blume.

#### 4.3. *The ship*

*THE SHIP / mobile / migrants' mobility towards the ship; migrants'*

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<sup>12</sup> On the links between covid-19, tourism and migrants, see Turco (2020). Moreover, looking specifically at the island of Lampedusa, the issue has been in the forefront of public attention, which led the then mayor of Lampedusa to publicly state that there was no contact between migrants and inhabitants prior to transfer to quarantine ships. <<https://tg24.sky.it/palermo/2021/06/08/lampedusa-migranti-pandemia-toto-martello>>.

*(im)mobility on the ship; (im)mobility of the on-board staff; relative (im)mobility of the ship itself; information (im)mobility.*

Overall, the new extraterritorial quarantine measures in Italy operated as a form of de facto offshore detention. Quarantine ships were a new step in the physical and procedural borders. Communication with the external world was strongly limited. Access was not allowed even to international organizations such as IOM, UNHCR or Save The Children, which have ordinary access to hotspots and detention facilities. Except for one case, neither journalists nor researchers were admitted on board.

As argued by ASGI (2021), while carrying out the measure of health surveillance on board ships, migrants are physically prevented from leaving: in fact, ships are most of the time at roadstead and not docked within ports. In addition, part of the personnel on board carry out control and surveillance activities: thus, a situation of subjection of those on the ship, with respect to the authorities in charge of control, is configured. Along these lines, lawyers, mediators and other humanitarians I interviewed confirmed the state of detention and control on the ships:

We did not have police on the ship, but those who performed a ‘security’ function were there (Int. 2).

At least one operator was guarding each deck (that’s what the floors were called), checking that migrants were not going out that imaginary door that had been created to keep people from leaving the cabins (Int. 1).

The reactions were sometimes really strong, also because they were locked in a ship where there is no window, there is nothing, where you are tested [to Covid-19] and you don’t test positive. The space is small, and you spend your whole day locked in your room like a prisoner, of course the reactions are strong. Every day there were guys with sometimes really violent reactions who said: «I didn’t kill anyone; I didn’t do anything to anyone. Why am I locked up here?» (Int. 3).

The description of the ships, the spaces available, the way people lived, reinforce this idea of a mobile confinement made of narrow spaces and limited freedom of movement on the ship itself. Moreover, as Denaro and Boccagni (2022) also report, people who were tested positive to Covid-19 had to be separated in a red zone of the ship, creating a complex hierarchy

of internal movement and immobilisation. The red zone was the most immobilised, followed by the deck where non-positive migrants were staying and finally followed by the relatively free operators, similarly to what Mountz (2014) described as islands within islands.

[...] the bridges were narrow and long and people came out through this little door where there was a little table. We did the group briefings outside. (Int. 2)

On these ships we were all crammed together: guests, operators and mediators. Instead of having one person per room, or two per room, they put you in a four bunks beds room. The guys inside are piled up, so I'll let you imagine what it's like, if you call that quarantine. That's what it's like: you've got 100/150 guys all piled up along a bridge where there are ten to twenty rooms. Each room has four to eight people inside. (Int. 3)

The ship's space, its immobility and movements have different repercussions. People are stuck on the ships and in their narrow spaces with effects on their bodies, as someone reported: «[...] the days when the sea gets rough practically everyone gets sick, everyone. Lots of people throwing up. The ship makes movements that bother people» (Int. 3). Also the lack of well-defined workshifts influenced people's bodies: «I had chronic cystitis because I didn't drink and didn't have time to go to the toilet. I gained weight and then lost it, in one month» (Int. 1).

The division of spaces and the rules imposed created or hindered the possibility of relations among the people on the ships. Migrants stayed up to 45 days on the quarantine ships and the operators spent one month in a row, some of them renewing their 'mission' for several months. This had psychological and physical effects on them and made the relationships on the ship the only kind of human relation people would have for a long time.

I luckily had a few colleagues with whom I got on well and with some I even became friends in the end [*laughs*]. Something human was going on if you were lucky, for better or for worse, because there were also very deep hatreds. But also, beautiful relationships that made people became very close because they were always together. [...] And there were also children locked in there who peeked outside, at these little tables, thirsty for life and things to see, and so maybe if you

had a chat with their mother, the child would recognise you... We used to get coloured markers in the rooms and go and colour with the children, to do some activities. But very little (Int. 2).

Relationships on the ships, and virtually beyond the single ship where one was on, meant also the ability to organise to obtain some rights. Mediators were asked to work up to 12 or even 15 hour shifts, most of the time to perform tasks that were not the one set for them. Indeed, they were asked (more often than other staff) to work as general operators. As interviewee 3 stated: «I remember that knowing all this, among the mediators we all started demonstrating together because unity is strength and so we raised our voices to get it as loud as possible, saying that we are being exploited inside the ships». And they finally obtained a higher salary.

The immobilisation of people on the ships correspond to a relative mobility of the ships themselves, which, as mentioned above, stay most of the time anchored offshore or on the move between ports to embark or disembark people. One of the reasons for avoiding staying docked is the cost of the piers at ports. The result is a (almost) constant mobility which alternates to stops, in recursive movements. An indirect effect is also the invisibilisation of the ships and the difficult communication with the outside, as the ships are often far away from phone networks. This element exacerbated isolation and the feeling of being detained.

We were often in Augusta and in Lampedusa, but of course we moved according to what we were asked, even when it didn't make too much sense. [...] These movements were related to landings and embarkations and to the ship vacancies (Int. 2).

There were many moments when we couldn't see land, and there was no phone reception, so we were completely isolated. [...] And I remember very well that people would realise that the ship was turning, and they would start asking, "are you taking us back to Libya now?" Every now and then these fears would erupt. We would leave in the morning and return in the evening. In my opinion it was because it was cheaper to fuel than to dock (Int. 1).

The mobility of the quarantine ships and the immobilisation of the people on it had material and immaterial outcomes. Some people after disembarking were able to continue their international protection process, some others, the majority, were notified of an expulsion or deferred

rejection order. The police headquarters in the places of disembarkation<sup>13</sup>, in the cases observed, executed these orders by means of forced accompaniment to the border. Therefore, in many cases, disembarkation was followed by a period of detention in Detention Centres for Repatriation (CPR).

For someone, the stay on the ship meant seeing their trip prolonged to the point that it seemed it never ended, as mentioned by interviewee 4. For new arrivals the quarantine ship was, therefore, the umpteenth extension of a trip, sometimes after perilous journeys by sea. For others, such as interviewee 3, it represented a sort of flashback, the ship reopened past traumas or experiences.

Seeing people being stacked one on top of the other, or seeing them with their feet cut, their hands cut, some with really serious injuries, who came from Libya. Seeing those things which I experienced first-hand, so that's what the ship reminded me a lot of (Int. 3).



Fig. 4 – The ports where the quarantine ships stopped. Source: author's elaboration based on interviews.

<sup>13</sup> Mainly Palermo, Augusta and Trapani, but also Syracuse, Catania, Messina and Bari.

Finally, for those who were deported from reception centres on the mainland to the ships, as described by Denaro and Boccagni (2022), the stay on the quarantine ships opened to the unwanted possibility of ‘going back’ to Lampedusa, and the consequent uncertainty of going back home. What home, we could wonder.

At this point in my analysis of ships as migrant detention sites – a key component of the “hygienic border” – I turn to interview excerpts to examine their function as border devices. Scholars (Montagna, 2023; Denaro and Boccagni, 2022; Giacomelli and Walker, 2022; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021), alongside my own research participants, emphasize that these ships were used instrumentally and arbitrarily. Their primary effect was to accelerate and smooth repatriation processes, which systematically hindered migrants’ ability to apply for asylum. There could have been other possibilities:

They were not quarantine ships, they were ‘waiting ships’, also to keep Italians unaware of how many people were arriving at that time because people were already desperate because of the Covid [...] (Int. 3).

The ship made the repatriation mechanism very easy: the entry door was one, the exit door was one. And when we were disembarking, the port was packed with police, so where would they go? There was clearly a violation of people’s rights because it wasn’t always possible to ask for protection (Int. 2).

[...] At the port, there was a disembarkation from the quarantine ship of a whole group of Tunisians with their wrists tied behind their back. So, it was obvious what was the reason [*for the ships*]. They could have organised the quarantine ashore. You don’t really have a reason, because if you have to put them on a ship first, you waste a lot of money. You can keep them ashore, as they did in Crotona, where there was a big centre for quarantine, but of course people would escape from there (Int. 1).

## 5. Conclusions

This article has examined three «geographical objects» (Cavallo, 2013: 1), the boat, the island and the (quarantine) ship as spaces of (im)mobilisation, revealing how they similarly function as sites of containment, exclusion, filtering and punishment. By considering the recursive and nonlinear mobilities that define migrant trajectories – encompassing boats, ships, and islands – I have observed how these spaces are not static or part of a linear path, but rather fluid, shaped by shifting policies, enforcement practices, and migrants' own agency. They create an archipelagic constellation, separate parts of a whole, where the sea can connect as well as hold back.

Human mobilities are tightly connected to a variety of relations created among people and/or with the places and objects that are encountered. However, the opportunities for creating these ties seem to be limited both on the island of Lampedusa – over time – and on the quarantine ships. The comparison between the two highlights the paradoxical nature of these spaces. The process of tightening the porosity of Lampedusa's reception centre started already before 2019 and its full implementation was confirmed after the pandemic, as in 2021 military control was set at all exit or entrance points, including the informal ones. Islands such as Lampedusa – potentially spaces of mobility and connections – retain a symbolic dimension as sites of both arrival and confinement, being materially militarised by the presence of soldiers and police forces, but also because the camps or reception centres present on them have been turned into areas of interest for national defence and security (Law n. 162,13/11/2023). The growing inaccessibility of the island spaces constrains the chances to imagine a return, but doesn't fully preclude this option, as the geographic space of the island remains an 'open' one for those who finally obtain a legal status. While for those who do not obtain it, there is no way to return if not through the revolving doors of the Mediterranean migration route.

On the other hand, quarantine ships operate as transient, securitised zones – even though they show their military side only at landings – that accelerate repatriation and reinforce the violence of the hotspot system. Quarantine ships, devoid of the symbolic weight of survival associated with migrant boats, function primarily as mechanisms of exclusion and

unjustified punishment, offering no lasting ties or possibilities for reconnection. Indeed, when people are placed on the ships, such as in the case of people transferred from Italian reception centres, out of context Lampedusa represents the fear of starting over the migration process.

These reflections underscore the broader spatial politics of migrant detention, where islands and ships are not merely passive backdrops but active instruments in the governance of mobility. Moreover, considering the definition of constellation mentioned above, ships are spaces that are looked at from far away are given a similar function as islands and their relative mobility is less noticeable. However, when considered closely they exacerbate some of the violent spatial and mobile elements of the islands' use with the extra possibility of materially detach the ship from the land and potentially move it far away, even outside territorial waters, increasing both isolation, control or connectedness as needed. Furthermore, from a legal point of view the use of ships could reinforce the process of externalisation of the frontier and the so-called 'fictitious non-entry' which implies the dismantlement of the right to asylum. Thus, quarantine ships are in fact an extra element of Mountz's enforcement archipelago.

The study aimed at contributing to critical discussions on mobility studies and island studies by emphasizing how such spaces are relationally constituted through movement, enforcement, and migrant agency. Future research should further explore how these dynamics evolve in response to shifting border regimes, as well as the ways in which migrants navigate, resist, and reimagine these constrained spaces. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that while islands and quarantine ships may still differ in their symbolic and material dimensions, both serve as key sites in the ongoing struggle over mobility, exclusion, and the right to belong.

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