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## Migration, Disaster and The Globalized Mediterranean: Between *Barca Nostra* and *Vertigo Sea*

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*The disaster ruins everything all the while leaving  
everything intact. It is deeply atemporal.*  
Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*.<sup>1</sup>

*We're all positioned by the wake but positioned  
differently. For me it's an analytic, a way to think  
about how the semiotics of the slave ship — the  
hold, the weather — continue to position Black  
people globally in certain kinds of precarity [...] the  
wake of those ships — and the wake of the  
ships crossing the Mediterranean today, for  
people in crisis, blocked from safe port — is a way  
to think about continued precarity and violence,  
and where you're positioned in relation to it.*  
Christina Sharpe, 'What does it mean to be Black  
and Look at this?'.<sup>2</sup>

The current entwining of populist immigration politics around illegalized or irregular migrants and the political rhetoric of the Covid-19 pandemic in UK public discourse is epitomized by the latest in a long line of spectacles staged by ex-UKIP leader Nigel Farage's performative border policing. In February 2021, he reported his trip to the British port of Dover to witness the arrival of a migrant boat with 12 people on board who he alleged all tested positive for Coronavirus. *The Independent* reported that his statement was quickly 'fact checked' by the Home Office on social media, who confirmed that none had in fact tested positive.<sup>3</sup> 'A pandemic is never just a pandemic' as Robin Celikates notes in his 'In the Midst' blog for *Critical Times in Global Critical Theory*, writing about the difficulty of thinking through the relationship of pandemic rhetorics to those that address movement and migration of peoples. 'While it is an obvious truth that the virus's spread does not respect any borders, governments across the world have resorted to closing their borders, more or less explicitly likening the threat of the virus to the "threat" of uncontrolled migration'.<sup>4</sup> Celikates argues convincingly that the pandemic exposes the failure of border policing and the illegitimacy of border regimes, not because the virus can cross borders, even as they become a focus of public political anxiety, but because the catastrophic effects of border policing are all too visible, such as the suffering of refugees in large crowded and insanitary camps at the EU's borders, in Greece for example, and the equally poor conditions of those in asylum and refugee centres within central EU national borders. It is this indifference toward the suffering of refugees at the EU's borders, or rather as Celikates observes, 'the EU's exercise of its "powers to make live or let die"', which rehearses a logic of disaster nationalism in which 'the virus is "othered" as a foreign threat or "invasion" and the closing of borders intensifies the "border spectacle" that is supposed to assure citizens that their government has everything under control'.<sup>5</sup> Farage's political spectacle might be usefully understood as a form of what Suvendrini Perera, deploying Adriana Cavarero's term, calls political 'horrorism',

‘characterised by the sheer useless excess, even exuberance, of its violence; its overkill. Its favored mode is the visual, and the symbolic: *stop the boats!*’.<sup>6</sup>

The political production of the ‘border spectacle’ where a scene is set for a display of concrete border policing, such as the capture of small boats in the English Channel or the Mediterranean represents a challenge to the critic; as Nicholas De Genova notes, ‘migration studies, critical or otherwise have long been challenged not to become ensnared in this spectacle, and the fetishized reification of migrant “illegality”’.<sup>7</sup> De Genova’s analysis proposes an understanding of the spectacular model of border policing as one that produces and constructs migrant illegality, and ‘this scene of exclusion is nevertheless always accompanied by its shadowy, publicly unacknowledged or disavowed, *obscene* supplement: the large-scale recruitment of illegalised migrants as legally vulnerable, precarious, and thus tractable labour’.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context in the last decade, that Mediterranean crossings by what are termed sub-Saharan irregular migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from North African coast to Southern Europe have received increased and ever more politicized mainstream media attention. In particular this has involved racially overdetermined images of overloaded precarious small boats sinking and different disastrous and exploitative encounters at sea which operate in Western media as politically freighted and spectacular images of and imaginings of refugee and migrant bodies and subjectivities.

In their discussion of artistic and cultural responses to these contemporary Mediterranean crossings, Cheryl Finley et al. comment that ‘probably the first time that a larger international audience empathetically took real note of this human rights catastrophe was when media reports of the dangerous crossings from Africa to Italy or Spain in April 2015 widely broadcast the shipwrecks of April 13 and April 19’.<sup>9</sup> As they note, this date comes after some of the most shocking, well-publicized tragedies took place just before this in 2013 and 2014 off the coasts of Italy and Greece and had both substantial media attention but also resulted in major responses from EU nation states. Nonetheless their argument holds that there was a period of humanitarian sympathy and collective guilt in the European response to these catastrophes that had a relatively short life, as both before and after this date images of African migrants crossing the Mediterranean circulated widely and advocacy groups, such as Amnesty International, and the UN and High Commission for Refugees had tried for years bring the conditions of those in refugee camps on Europe’s border to wider public attention.

Many EU based artistic interventions in this ongoing tragedy also saw themselves in the role of refugee advocacy, seeking to bring attention to the plight of those crossing the Mediterranean and ‘on the move’, through camps across the region. One of the most prominent artistic interventions has been a body of work from Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who produced a series of sculptural and installation works and the documentary film *Human Flow* (2017), screened at the 2017 Venice Biennale, that have sought to highlight the plight of refugees in numerous locations.<sup>10</sup> Ai’s work was always close to the migrants he represented, for example his work with life jackets, including his 2016 installation on the columns of Berlin’s Konzerthaus involved 14,000 life jackets from refugees who landed on the Greek Island of Lesbos, which he collected whilst he was working on the island helping with refugee welcoming organisations. However, perhaps his best-known work, the notorious photograph of the artist recreating the iconic image of three-year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, whose body was found on the coast near Bodrum in Turkey, demonstrates the ethical limitations of the artist’s engagement with and desire to highlight the plight of refugees in the Mediterranean basin. This piece was widely condemned by critics and journalists alike, as a ‘disastrous appropriation’, as Mette Mortensen comments, in her discussion of the use and

reuse of Alan Kurdi imagery, it circulated as a ‘crass selfie’ that tested the limits of decontextualization, whose intent was misplaced.<sup>11</sup> Indeed it reproduced the dominant media image of the refugee, sensational, shocking and contextless.

T.J. Demos notes the ways that mainstream media defines the dominant conventions of migrant representation via ‘a stubborn regime of visual representation that tends to occlude intersecting factors’.<sup>12</sup> Characterising Ai’s photograph as a ‘guilt-relieving identification’ he argues convincingly that the circulation of this image simply reproduced the viewing structures of ‘a corporate (anti)social media frenzy characterized by sensationalist reporting and imaging’.<sup>13</sup> This view is shared by Finley et al., who question the terms on which refugee representation has been framed, stating that ‘our aim is not to diminish the very real suffering in war-torn countries such as Syria. Rather we want to highlight the ways the presentism of this debate [...] depends upon a kind of racialized colonial amnesia that does not see these economic “migrants” are the product of a long history of slavery and colonialism’.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Ida Danewid argues that the politics of migrant representation rehearses ‘white innocence’ in the face of the ongoing migration disaster and can only be meaningful if a critical approach that centres on the legacies of European imperialism and colonialism is deployed.<sup>15</sup> Danewid also interrogates the rise of an ethic of hospitality that seeks to disrupt nationalist protocols of kinship to point towards new forms of solidarity beyond borders. She argues that much of this discourse still reproduces the premise of migrant as ‘strangers’, ‘charitable subjects’, and ‘uninvited guests’.<sup>16</sup> Rather than placing ongoing tragedy in the context of Europe’s constitutive history of Empire, colonial conquest and transatlantic slavery, this critical approach highlights ideas of shared vulnerability, loss, mourning, and for Danewid risks erasing history in the name of a fetishized stranger creating a new affective and political grammar of mourning as pro-refugee action. This mode risks contributing to the ideological formations that disconnect histories and divorce contemporary Mediterranean crisis from Europe’s long history of empire and racial violence. The risks of the politics of mourning then are a reinscription of wilful amnesia – forms of social and cultural forgetting that produce a ‘white innocence’ that sees little or no relation between current social advantages and the longer history of structural violence.

In this paper I explore how a selection of artworks and poetry that responded to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, sought to critique, respond to or found themselves complicit with the dominant political construction of migration as crisis in Europe and beyond. This paper will focus on three artworks that featured at three consecutive Venice Biennales, John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which premiered at ‘All the World’s Futures’ curated by Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Mariel’s *Mediterràneo* (2017) which he performed at ‘Viva Arte Viva’ curated by Christine Macel and Christoph Büchel’s *Barca Nostra* (Our Boat, 2019) which was installed at ‘May You Live in Interesting Times’, curated by Ralph Rugoff. In addition to these pieces, I will discuss the Goldsmith, University of London-based group Forensic Oceanography’s work, reflecting on the overlap of their concerns with tragedies and disasters at sea in the Mediterranean basin with Büchel’s Venice installation, as the same boat features in both of their works. I will also discuss the poem ‘Lampedusa’ in Eritrean poet Ribka Sibhatu’s collection *Aulò! Aulò! Aulò!* (2019) and Tsedaye Makonnen’s performance ‘When Drowning is the Best Option Astral Sea 1’ in front of the *Barca Nostra* installation during the exhibition.

There are a number of reasons for the choice of the Venice Biennale as a geographical anchor for this discussion, firstly its centrality to the Eurocentric art world and its current preoccupations, produced via national narratives through the pavilions, and secondly its

specific location in Italy, a key site of the ongoing migration crisis and one intimately linked to some of the works discussed and also its geographical and historical relation to the Mediterranean itself. As SA Smythe notes in 'The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination' the concept of the Black Mediterranean, initially popularized by Alessandra Di Maio, 'focusses on the proximity that exists, and has always existed between Italy and Africa, separated [...] but also united by the Mediterranean [...] and documented in legends, myths, histories, even culinary traditions, in visual art, and religion'.<sup>17</sup> This important critical intervention reframes a view of the Mediterranean, firstly seeing it as a precondition for the more widely discussed conception of the Black Atlantic and secondly countering the rise of far right and ethno-nationalist models of nation states that have been deployed in EU wide discourses of migration. I will explore the ways in which attention to Black studies and postcolonial thinking has been used to intervene in dominant frames of representation of the crimes and tragedies that have taken place in recent years through the policing of the EU's water borders, in relation to the intense political focus on migration and it's handling by European nations and to critique the terms on which Europe wrestled with its collective responsibilities in the face of this ongoing tragedy.

In *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (2016), Reece Jones discusses what for ethno-nationalist political agendas has come to be termed the 'global migration crisis' brought to growing prominence in the public sphere in a European context by reports of hundreds dying in multiple shipwrecks in the Mediterranean and seeking refuge in camps such as those in Greece and Italy. He notes the shocking statistics for migrant death rates at borders in a European context, where 'globally more than half the deaths at borders in the past decade have occurred at the edges of the EU, making it by far the most dangerous border crossing in the world'.<sup>18</sup> Jones argues persuasively against the dominant international discourse about the causes of these disasters. 'There is a powerful idea in the media and in wealthy societies that violence at the borders is inevitable when less developed, less orderly countries rub against the rich developed states of the world'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the discourse of 'hardening' the border is the increasingly populist political remedy to sustain power. National governmental responses in Europe almost universally reflect this view, the reinstatement of border checks that were dispensed with by the EU internally are now visible at its external land borders in the east and on its coastal ones across the Mediterranean. Jones argues conversely that the hardening of the border is the cause or source of the violence and suffering now found at these borders, not a response to it. The structural violence of borders for Jones is the transformation of the border in recent decades from marking the edge of different political and economic systems to militarized security spaces, where the deployment of troops for example in the U.S. increasingly involves an application of military ideologies and technologies that leak from the border into the domestic spaces of the nation itself. Jones's model shares something with Suvendrini Perera's concept of a borderscape, 'a protean changeable geography of punishment and lethal force', which encompasses the ocean as 'a very particular type of theatre', where what takes place may not be visible: 'on-water [is] a space both within and outside the law, is swathed in a very public shroud of secrecy. [...] At the same time *on-water* is a chamber of horrors that houses the bodies and bones of the drowned and disappeared'.<sup>20</sup>

In 2014 Forensic Oceanography, an offshoot of the award-winning group Forensic Architecture, produced *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat*, which was first screened at the *Haus der Kulturen du Welt* in Berlin. The 17-minute-long film, directed by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, used 'drift model' satellite images, optical and Synthetic Aperture Radar satellites and ship-borne transponder systems to reconstruct events surrounding the fate

of a boat that left Tripoli with 72 passengers in March 2011, heading for the Italian island of Lampedusa and left without help after engine failure for 14 days, leading to the deaths of all but 9 of the people on board. It was, in their own words, an attempt to ‘make the invisible crisis at sea visible’, addressing directly Perera’s depiction of the hidden violence of the borderscape. They comment that ‘it reconstructed the liquid traces of the event, producing a report that served as the basis of several legal complaints’.<sup>21</sup> The power of the piece was its reconstructive detail that made visible a wide range of national and organisational territories, spheres of influence, surveillance and responsibility in the middle of the Mediterranean.

In the European context, a militarized and structural violence can be clearly seen in the extension of the border into the sea, and in a technical and political mapping of that space. The EU response to deaths in the Mediterranean is a semi-militarized one, organized via Frontex, the European Border and Coastguard Agency comprised of national police, border guards and naval forces of different participant nations. It was initially established to coordinate border control efforts by EU members in 2004 and expanded explicitly in response to the migration crisis of 2015. Frontex instigated a number of operations that targeted key migration routes to Europe, via national land and sea borders and tracks the routes of all vessels travelling across the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century the sea was carved up, following the unilateral creation of the US exclusive economic area by President Truman in 1946, with the creation of the Law of the Sea following a UN convention of the same name. Coastal jurisdiction that previously went 3.5 miles from the coastlines of states that had a coast was superseded by a new agreement signed in 1982 which came into force in 1994 and extended states claims as far as 350 nautical miles. Movement restriction now applies to 44% of the ocean reclassified as territorial sea – through extended continental shelves and exclusive economic zones – to produce a form of watery enclosure. The Mediterranean itself is invisibly carved up by the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, dividing it between different countries responsible for overseeing that part that meets their coastal borders.

In making visible the NATO Maritime Surveillance Area around the Libyan coast, the search and rescue zones for Malta and Italy that the boat passed through, and the numerous surveillance technologies that saw and monitored the boat from these different organisations, *Liquid Traces: The Left to Die Boat* demonstrated how fully visible, even hyper-visible the boat was from the point it set off until it eventually drifted back to the Libyan coast following engine failure. In this technically mediated space thick with events and complex relations between people, environments and data the film recast the notion of structural violence in aesthetic terms, as violence hidden in plain sight. They comment ‘As should now be clear from our discussion of the scopic system assembled to monitor maritime traffic, it is no longer true that the sea entirely resists being written. The maritime space is constantly registered’.<sup>23</sup> Their next work, *Death by Rescue* (2016), opens an investigation into the fate of between 700 to 1,100 people aboard a Tunisian fishing vessel used as a migrant boat involved in a collision with a Portuguese container ship, *King Jacob*, in April 2015 which was attempting to become involved in a rescue operation at the request of the Italian coastguard. The scale of this disaster and public outcry led to the Italian government seeking to retrieve the boat and the bodies of those drowned. However, as *Death by Rescue* revealed, the disaster was caused by the removal of a more substantial search and rescue operation, and its replacement with a rhetoric/strategy of rescue that was arbitrary, contingent and ultimately deadly. It is in this context that SA Smythe’s comments on the mathematics of Black life in the Mediterranean are striking, ‘it would be a helpful provocation to examine the farce of the recurrent practice of enumeration, of counting people without being accountable to them’.<sup>24</sup>

This 'accounting' being what Katherine McKittrick terms the mathematics of Black life, 'breathless, archival numerical evidence'.<sup>25</sup>

The fate of this boat is intimately linked to earlier closure of the military-humanitarian Operation *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea) search and rescue operation set up by Italy in October 2013, the title of the piece *Barca Nostra* gesturing to this operation.<sup>26</sup> It responded to the two Lampedusa tragedies of October 2013, where two shipwrecks of migrant boats claimed more than six hundred lives, and the subsequent change of political will in the sea that ended this short-lived project to rescue migrant boats and replace it with an EU project, Frontex's Operation Triton in October 2014. The use of military/border force was justified against 'human traffickers' who were portrayed as the instigators of doomed journeys, through false promises to the most vulnerable and desperate. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi reiterated as much in his statement, 'Human traffickers are the slave traders of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and they should be brought to justice'.<sup>27</sup> The underlying assertion that the traffickers are the root cause of the problems, not the closing down of safer legal means of claiming asylum, was opportunistically equated to slavery by Renzi, a move challenged by Woods and Saucier in 'Ex-Aqua: The Mediterranean Basin, Africans on the move and the Politics of Policing'. Commenting on this mobilisation of a slave trade discourse, they write:

Anti-trafficking activists promote their cause by analogising human trafficking as 'the new slavery' or even as 'the real slavery'. At the same time, anti-trafficking discourse reiterates the contention that Africans were in fact as culpable for the transatlantic slave trade as were Europeans. [...] the responsibility of North African traffickers and labour agents in the Mediterranean is overplayed and results in a similar double manoeuvre [... it] it eases the burden on Italy and the European Union and [it] positions Europeans as modern-day abolitionists.<sup>28</sup>

Following Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'slavery's afterlife', Woods and Saucier apply it to the conditions of migration in the 'Euro-American Basin', arguing that it calls for a 'reconceptualization of the Left' whose current responses, based on precariousness, as a shared condition of human life, are problematic: the contemporary anti-slavery movement 'deploys the spectre of African slaves as "surrogate selves" through which to meditate on the ongoing problems of human freedom global capitalism still presents'.<sup>29</sup> They take issue with the dominant role of mourning and, asserting shared vulnerability that is used to enable a 'we' to be forged across cultural and other differences, ask if this academic debate is reproducing, not transforming, foundational assumptions of the far right. The privileging of 'ontological' rather than historical links that bind together humankind these ethical perspectives contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects histories that are intimately connected and removes from view the afterlives of historical and ongoing colonialism. They argue for a switch of vocabulary that shifts away from questions of ethical neglect or bad border policing practices. Reading with Woods and Saucier we must account for the racialized structures at the heart of the Mediterranean crisis. A lack of explicit engagement with race and Black studies erases the structures of anti-Blackness that they argue make this situation only comprehensible through an understanding of how 'the policing and murder of hundreds of Africans in the Mediterranean [...] are not single and episodic events or moments in time, but are situated in the accumulated violence against black people globally'.<sup>30</sup> That Renzi turns to slave trade analogies and not to Italy's own colonial legacies is disingenuous. The overwhelming majority of the passengers on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October boat were Eritreans, fleeing the dictatorship of Isias Afwerki. This point is emphasized by Italy-based

Eritrean writer Ribka Sibhatu, who commemorated the shipwreck of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October in her poem 'Lampedusa'. In her address to the Italian Parliament in May 2016, in a session on Sub-Saharan Development, she explicitly demanded they ask what Italy's responsibility was to Eritrea as a former colony and, as Andre Naffis-Sahely comments, 'implored the Italian Parliament to honour their countries' shared histories'.<sup>31</sup> Whilst the Italian authorities sought to retrieve the bodies and the drowned were given a state funeral, representatives of Afwerki's regime were invited to attend, 'the very people whom the victims had fled from' Naffis-Sahely wryly notes.<sup>32</sup> Sibhatu's poem 'Lampedusa' reasserts history, context and voice where these have been erased. The speaker situates herself in the boat, voicing and individualising the anonymized and silenced, noting the joy of the passengers as they see lights indicating land ahead and burst into singing hymns:

having survived a brutal dictatorship  
And a journey of pitfalls  
They stood atop their raft in the dead of night  
And saw the lights of the promised land'  
and then the horror of their realisation that the boat is on fire and sinking,  
'among the floating corpses  
Mebrahtom raised a desperate cry  
Yohanna! Yohanna! Yohanna! But Yohanna doesn't answer;  
All alone, and in  
an extreme act of love,  
she brought her son into the world,  
birthing him into the fish filled sea:  
yet nobody in Lampedusa  
heard the seven ululations welcoming his birth!  
U'g g g g g g g g g g g g g g g<sup>33</sup>

In Sibhatu's poem the voices of the Eritrean and other passengers are everywhere, singing hymns of thanks, calling out to one another in the water, saying their names and countries, calling their relatives, and welcoming the birth of a new-born with the ululations at the heart of the poem.

In 2019, Swiss-Icelandic artist Christophe Büchel exhibited the now notorious piece *Barca Nostra* (Our Boat) at the Venice Biennale, the same fishing boat that Forensic Oceanography had documented sinking due to its collision with the *King Jacob* in the Mediterranean three years earlier. Much attention has been given to this controversial piece, often at the expense of works made by African diasporic cultural producers. The boat was recovered from the bottom of the sea by the Italian navy and kept at a NATO base in Sicily to attempt to identify the victims and later, after a convoluted political wrangle on the final fate of the boat, to be used as possible material evidence for a trial or as a monument, it was displayed in the Arsenale in Venice by Büchel, loaned to him for a year and transported at his own considerable cost.<sup>34</sup> The exhibition of a boat that had such tragic recent history at the Biennale, was criticized from both the left and right of the political spectrum; in fear of the boat's potential to challenge his far right immigration agenda, Italian politician Matteo Salvini denounced the boat as political propaganda, others were unhappy with the lack of labelling stripping the context from the boat (other than in the brochure for the Biennale itself), and with widespread images of tourists drinking in cafes facing the boat and taking smiling selfies in front of it. Stephen Pritchard comments that 'to exhibit it as a "relic" or "monument" [to] such a tragic loss of life is to reify, commodify and totally exploit the lives



of not only those who lost their lives but migration itself', arguing that the exhibit constituted a 'hyper-spectacle' serving to 'artwash all the complex political, social and environmental issues that created and maintain the falsity of a "migrant crisis"'.<sup>35</sup> It is a 'violent appropriation of a disastrous situation that is entirely of Europe's making – of the Western world's making'.<sup>36</sup> Büchel's installation of the boat was directly challenged by Ethiopian American artist Tsedaye Makonnen who performed 'When Drowning is the Best Option. Astral Sea 1' in front of the boat during the exhibition.<sup>37</sup> Makonnen walked in front of the boat draped in a long blue garment/sarong adorned with acrylic mirror pieces, repeatedly throwing the fabric over her head onto the walkway, where the mirrors made a shattering sound. She repeated this activity until asked to stop by a security guard, where she then protested at the display of the boat and commented 'I don't authorise them putting black death on display'.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the only notable scholar of Black studies who has offered a radically different reading of Büchel's installation of the migrant boat is Rinaldo Walcott, who in 'The Black Aquatic' comments that he had read many reviews of *Barca Nostra* and expected his own reactions to the piece to be similar on his visit. He argues however that he found the piece to be more open, with the potential to open up a conversation around memorialisation and monuments, and their relationship to mourning. He argues strongly against the idea that this display was insensitive, rather (following Sylvia Wynter), 'If we take seriously Wynter's argument that the aesthetic is meant to do something and that the something is political' then *Barca Nostra* as 'spectacle' offered a chance for 'a confrontation with both our now and our past simultaneously'.<sup>39</sup> For Walcott, this merging of past and present, is where 'the Middle Passage is firmly globalized'.<sup>40</sup>

Reflecting on the significance of these interventions, I want to turn to two earlier pieces that featured in the two preceding Biennales, Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and Carlos Martiel's *Mediterràneo* (2017) and consider Büchel's work and Walcott's reading in the light of them. This is partly because they deploy some elements of lamentation and elegy but also because, in their different modes, they transform ethical and aesthetic and political approaches to contemporary migration, disaster and trauma in the Mediterranean basin. In 2017, Cuba selected Afro-Cuban performance artist Carlos Martiel for its entry to the 2017 Venice Biennale. His piece *Mediterràneo* is clearly a direct reference to the Italian response to the Mediterranean drownings, with Martiel kneeling in the lower half of a large glass container that was gradually filled with water from the Mediterranean until he signalled that he needed to be released before he drowned. Finley et al. comment that:

by taking pictures of his near drowning act, the audience, wittingly or unwittingly, turned into the privileged citizens of countries that 'watch' the human catastrophe that is taking place right in front of their eyes, yet then have the privilege to choose to turn around and walk away to other, equally 'entertaining' parts of the Biennale.<sup>41</sup>

The piece also uncannily echoes the public drowning in the Grand Canal in Venice of a 22 year old Gambian refugee, Pateh Sabally, in January 2017, in full view of tourists. SA Smythe comments that this event was reported in the Italian media both in terms of the shocking lack of care or concern and indeed overt hostility of the onlookers, and in terms of an assumption that the drowning was a suicide.<sup>42</sup> Whilst Martiel's performance shares the conceit of substituting his own body for that of a drowned migrant, as Weiwei had notoriously done, Martiel's performance both registers the violence of the spectacle (what SA Smythe calls the being 'allowed to die') and a Trans\* Atlantic connection, that binds the routes, histories and legacies of African enslavements to the Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup>

Four years before Büchel's installation, John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, a three screen 48-minute installation, dizzyingly intersecting history, fiction and philosophy, was shown at the Okwui Enwezor curated Biennale, the first to be curated by an African. Named as a highlight of the 2015 Biennale, I would argue that this piece, which shares a key aesthetic with Martiel, has not always been acknowledged as centrally concerned with the ongoing disasters in the Mediterranean, nor fully recognized as paradigmatic of the conceptual approaches of those theorizing the Black Mediterranean. In interview, Akomfrah comments that the inspiration for *Vertigo Sea* came from a radio interview that he heard with a group of Nigerian migrants who had survived a crossing of the Mediterranean and expressed the feeling of being faced with something vaster and more awesome than they had thought possible.<sup>44</sup> Akomfrah comments, 'the young Nigerian is very important to me. Here's a figure who walked from the rainforest of West Africa onto a boat that then shipwrecked'.<sup>45</sup> Akomfrah's film approaches the sea as mesmerising and unfathomable, juxtaposing BBC natural history film footage with a range of other found material and newly made film that offers an elegiac aesthetic of the afterlives of slavery, empire and global colonial and totalitarian atrocities, in a sea 'full' of life and death. He comments that:

there are a lot of writers who play supporting roles in the construction of *Vertigo Sea*. One is Derek Walcott. The phrase 'the sea is history' is in one of his poems. Usually people understand 'history' to mean the narratives of human acts but here it encompasses more than that. 'The sea is history' also implies that there might be other means by which temporality is registered in our universe.<sup>46</sup>

In 'On Terror and Beauty: John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*', T.J. Demos comments that 'the installation portrays the ocean as a site of both terror and beauty, and creates a vast expanse of historical meanings and experiential sensations in which incongruous narratives interact. [...] while oceanic signs of climate change and global warming in footage of melting and crashing glaciers, form a counterpoint with shots of the sea as a cemetery out of which the bodies of countless Europe-bound migrants wash up on shore'.<sup>47</sup> The film includes extensive footage from David Attenborough's 2001 documentary, *The Blue Planet*, interspersed with archival footage of work on whaling boats, the slaughter of polar bears and footage, shot by Akomfrah, depicting Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–97; the freed African and abolitionist who later travelled to the Arctic), and images of enslaved people and interiors of slave ships. For Akomfrah it is vital that his 'history of the sea' intertwines these different elements as it produces multiple potential readings and responses, as he comments he has had very different conversations in different locations when the installation has shown, in Margate, Denmark or San Francisco, whose histories in relation to migration and refugees, whaling or the figure of the sea in art history produce multiple responses.

Perhaps the most significant recent intervention has come from Christina Sharpe, who in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, proposes a series of modes of thinking about, and thinking through, the notion of 'wake work', starting with the image of the wake as multivalent: 'Wake : the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow'.<sup>48</sup> Sharpe's project is to 'articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are'.<sup>49</sup> To

be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved and unfolding.

Seth Rodney suggests that *Vertigo Sea* is a visual and affective experience which offers juxtaposed fragments of historical montage not primarily for 'information' but as a means of exploring how to see the 'disaster that continues to unfold', using the sea as an aquatic space that binds subjects and histories together. T.J. Demos argues that 'one effect of entering geological space-time of *Vertigo Sea* is that we lose our bearings – referentially, philosophically, perceptually – and find ourselves tipping into a nauseous loss of balance that is the very definition of vertigo'.<sup>50</sup> In his work on Black liberation, Frank B. Wilderson describes vertigo as 'concept that allows us to theorize the experiences of Black activist political trials in the US, in particular the actions of insurgent groups who 'flip' the courtroom by assuming the role of prosecutor with the public gallery as jury. This mode can be a subjective form of vertigo, a 'moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world, a vertigo brought on by a clash of grossly asymmetrical forces'. Or it can be an objective vertigo, 'the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one's environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogised [...] a life constituted by disorientations rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. It is structural'.<sup>51</sup>

This attempt to explore structural disorientation might be a useful way to conceive of the effect of the immersive juxtaposition of the viewer in such varied and disorienting footage. Speaking about the *Vertigo Sea*, and about his practice more broadly, Akomfrah comments in interview that montage possesses the power to elicit "unconscious relations between the subject and historical forces," "uncanny" affinities beyond the "literalism of historical causality." *Vertigo Sea* builds on that precedent, defining an innovative cinematic methodology to endow the past, present, and future with new meanings.<sup>52</sup> For Akomfrah, lens-based work enables things to be drawn into an affective proximity, when they become proximate something else starts to happen. They 'seem' as if they are talking to one another. Montage has the ability to elicit unconscious relations and uncanny affinities in particular the work frequently collapses the sublime into human histories where the human and non-human and more than human, blend, blur and corrupt one another. Using images of slavery and archival footage works as an act of exhumation for something gone, a requiem, whose language of mourning and elegy which is not just poetic but has a political efficacy produced by vertigo. The effects of this juxtaposition, accompanied by a rich enfolding soundtrack of the sea, are overwhelming. Rodney comments,

*Vertigo Sea* is devastating, [...] the lyricism of the work is so encasing, so enveloping, so profound that after leaving it to return to my waking life I glance backward over my shoulder wondering how I might stay in that world a little longer. [...] There's too much, really: too much sea [...] too much predacious elegance [...] too much gratuitous death [...] it is so terrible and ravishing, that I have to rearrange myself to make room for it, to take it in, so it doesn't wash me away in its lyricism. But then I understand that it will wash me away, and perhaps should so that I am reminded that this world does not belong to me. I belong to it.<sup>53</sup>

Akomfrah's work I would argue, shares Walcott's sense of the Black aquatic as something that 'pursues the relationship Black people have to bodies of water as foundationally formative of blackness' and that 'seeks to provide an aesthetic narratology and hauntology of

contemporary claims of black subjectivity'.<sup>54</sup> (Following Jacques Derrida's extensive work on hauntology, all images imply afterlife, whether haunting or ghosting the current moment. The afterlife of the image is vital, not just because Akomfrah animates and repositions the archival material he has sourced, but because it allows a different inflection of the subjects being filmed. Akomfrah's work, a devastating meditation on slavery's afterlives, also offers a political and aesthetic engagement with and in the Black Mediterranean. As Jacob Nilsson comments, 'the film ebbs and flows, its totality makes the case that human's relationship to the ocean has been logistical in ways that exceed yet contain the ongoing traumas of the Middle Passage'.<sup>55</sup> It is in this sense that Walcott argues *Barca Nostra* haunts, offering an after-life to the shipwrecked boat which, like all ghosts, unearths the past. In this sense both Akomfrah's and Büchel's work, whilst appearing to speak otherwise than one another, directly counter what SA Smythe calls the 'presentism' used to refuse Black histories and stories in 'Europe'. Negotiating between the shared histories of the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean, *Vertigo Sea* seeks to animate the past, and to acknowledge the ocean as at once an unstable archive and a site of grieving and remembrance for the African diasporic subject. Whilst *Barca Nostra* may retain its reputation as the most vilified and contentious installation at the Venice Biennale, its violent disinterring when viewed through Walcott's critical frame of the Black aquatic articulates a globalized middle passage 'for me, as Black viewer invested in making sense of global black subjugation, *Barca Nostra* spectacularly highlighted the liquidity of Black life and the loss of Black life simultaneously—its liquidation'.<sup>56</sup> For Walcott the Mediterranean crossings are an extension of the Middle Passage that cannot be pluralized but can and has been globalized.

This article has sought to root/route its thinking about contemporary responses to European migration politics in visual arts through an engagement with some important interventions by thinkers in Black and postcolonial studies who have sought to transform the critical and political frameworks through which the current ongoing disaster in the Mediterranean can be understood and challenged. In 'Ex Aqua: The Mediterranean Basin, Africans on the move and the Politics of Policing' Woods and Saucier argue that 'slavery's afterlife remains hidden from [...] critics of EU border policies in part because Europe's historical formation *as* antiblack is still impermissible knowledge today'.<sup>57</sup> In particular Saucier suggests that debates about constructing a new ethical European citizen are attempting to 'split' the white subject into 'good' and 'bad', and dead immigrants function as a conduit through which Europe discusses how to save itself. It is against this dominant European framing that the work and criticism discussed offers vital counter framings and an urgent argument for the political role of the aesthetic in demanding a different and more radical vision, and critical and political methodology.

## Notes

1 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 5.

2 Interview with Sharpe, 'What does it mean to be Black and Look at this?'.

3 Buchan, 'Nigel Farage condemned for boat trip into English Channel to report migrant "invasion"'.

4 Celikates, 'Borders in Times of Pandemic'.

5 Ibid.

6 Perera, 'Burning Our Boats', 6.

7 De Genova, *Citizenship's Shadow*, 24

8 Ibid.

- 9 Finley et al., 'Visualizing Protest', 316.
- 10 Ai, *Human Flow*.
- 11 Mortensen, 'Constructing, confirming and contesting icons'.
- 12 Demos, 'The Visual Politics of Climate Refugees', 90.
- 13 Ibid., 108.
- 14 Finley et al. 'Visualizing Protest', 318.
- 15 Danewid, 'White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean'.
- 16 Ibid., 1675
- 17 Alessandro di Maio, cited in Smythe, 'The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination'.
- 18 Jones, *Violent Borders*, 15.
- 19 Ibid., 3.
- 20 Perera, 'Burning our Boats', 4.
- 21 *Liquid Traces: The Left-to-die boat*.
- 22 Jones, *Violent Borders*, 24.
- 23 Heller and Pezzani, 'Liquid Traces: Investigating the Deaths of Migrants at the EU's Maritime Frontier', 673.
- 24 Smythe, 'The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination', 5.
- 25 McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', 16.
- 26 Mare Nostrum as SA Smythe notes was a contemporary revival of the phrase used in the Roman Empire to denote authority over 'our sea'.
- 27 Jones, *Violent Borders*, 25.
- 28 Woods and Saucier, 'Ex-Aqua', 68-69.
- 29 Ibid, 68.
- 30 Ibid, 55.
- 31 Naffis-Sahely, 'Translator's Introduction', 1.
- 32 Ibid.2.
- 33 Subhatu, *Aulò! Aulò! Aulò!* , 3.
- 34 Paynter and Miller, 'The White Readymade and the Black Mediterranean'.
- 35 Pritchard, "'Our boat'"
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Makonnen, 'When Drowning is the Best Option'.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Walcott, 'The Black Aquatic', 66-9.
- 40 Ibid, 71.
- 41 Finley et al. 'Visualizing Protest', 324.
- 42 Smythe, 'The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination', 4.
- 43 Ibid., 5.
- 44 Sankey and Westbrook, 'An Interview with John Akomfrah'.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Demos, 'On Terror and Beauty'.
- 48 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 3.
- 49 Ibid., 13.
- 50 Demos, 'On Terror and Beauty'.
- 51 Wilderson, 'The Vengeance of Vertigo'.
- 52 T.J. Demos, "Unspeakable Moments: An Interview with John Akomfrah," 59.
- 53 Rodney, 'Making Room to take in the Depth of John Akomfrah's Vertigo Sea'.
- 54 Walcott, 'The Black Aquatic', 65
- 55 Vikram, *Underneath the Black Atlantic*,

56 Walcott, 'The Black Aquatic', 63.

57 Woods and Saucier, 'Ex-Aqua', 69.

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