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*The humanitarian labor regime: A new spatio-racial politics of
labor in contemporary Europe*

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'R. Nocera', is written over the printed name of the coordinator.

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Modernity is a promise that cannot be kept.

—Houria Bouteldja

Introduction

THE IDEAS BEHIND THE HUMANITARIAN LABOR REGIME

...the issue of refugees and asylum seekers, which is always talked about even in anti-racist movements especially in terms of reception or protection, now concerns the organization of labor and shows the link between the struggles against exploitation and those against institutional racism and border policies.

— Transnational Migrants' Coordination (2021:16).

Another study on the “refugee crisis”? The question is a valid one. In recent years, indeed, countless socio-anthropological works have been published on the “European migratory question” (De Genova 2016). In the wake of what has been labeled by (mainstream) media and policymakers as the 2015 “refugee crisis,” research on the topic has experienced exponential growth.¹ This ethnographic project aims to provide new analytical and theoretical insights by examining the “refugee crisis” from a partially unexplored perspective. In short, it contends that the changes in the migration governance occurred in Europe during the 2010s² are to be considered in terms of a new spatio-racial politics of labor, which I propose to call “the humanitarian labor regime.”

Some four years ago, when I began contemplating this project, I was intrigued by an article authored by Nick Dines and Enrica Rigo (2017), who introduced the concept of “humanitarian exploitation” (see also Dines and Rigo 2015; Ramsay 2019). This article, which in fact did not receive much academic attention, argued that the European asylum regime produced a peculiar political economy of exploitation of migrant labor. I found particularly intriguing this concept—

¹ For a critical examination of the concept of crisis in relation to the European migration management, see: Bojadžijev, Mezzadra (2015), De Genova (2016, 2017), De Genova, Tazzioli (2016), De Genova, Garelli, Tazzioli (2018), Mellino (2019).

² For an overview on the recent changes in the European migration governance, see: Hess, Kasperek (2017), Kreikauf (2018), Mellino (2019). These works explore these governmental evolutions against the backdrop of the “Europeanization” of asylum and migration policies, a fragmented, partial, and protean process that dates back to the treaty of Schengen (1985) and other subsequent agreements, see: Campesi (2015b), Fassin (2012), Rigo (2007), Walters (2002), Walters and Haahr (2005).

humanitarian exploitation—as it implicitly suggested the necessity to intertwine two (trans)disciplinary fields that had hitherto remained relatively separated: on the one hand, critical studies on humanitarian government, and on the other, the literature on the exploitation and racialization of (migrant) labor. While the article proposed a theoretical and analytical path, it did little to provide concrete answers. This inspired me to ask, what were the specificities of “humanitarian exploitation”? And how does “humanitarian exploitation” differ from other forms and regimes of migrant labor exploitation?

Some of the most influential socio-anthropological studies on humanitarianism and asylum seekers relegate the issue of labor exploitation to a somewhat marginal position. Despite diverse approaches and perspectives, works by authors such as Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986), Liisa Malkki (1995, 1996), Didier Fassin (2012), Miriam Ticktin (2011), Michel Agier (2005, 2011), Antonio de Lauri (2016, 2019), Zygmunt Baumann (2004), Paolo Cutitta (2017), Barbara Sorgoni (2011, 2013), Vicky Squire (2009, 2015), Giuseppe Campesi (2015a, 2018a), Barbara Pinelli (2014, 2017), Polly-Pallister Wilkins (2015, 2017, 2022a), Maurizio Albahari (2015), William Walters (2011), just to name a few, predominantly focus on the ethical and (bio)political tensions and contradictions that criss-cross the humanitarian management of asylum seekers in different socio-geographical contexts. Exploring the figure of the asylum seeker (see Chapter 1), these studies seem to suggest, can tell us much about what we can term the “undersides of humanitarianism.”

While humanitarian government is based on moral universalist principles—for example, we are all human beings and belong to the human community without any distinctions and discriminations (Fassin 2012)—it actually relies on and reproduces a series of human(itarian) hierarchies (see Chapter 2), dynamics of socio-political exclusion and spatial confinement (Agier 2011; Campesi 2018a; Squire 2009), and bureaucratic violence, which erodes incommensurable and subjective differences in the name of opaque categories (such as that of the “asylum seeker”) (Malkki 1996; Sorgoni 2013). We will reflect on some of these dynamics in the following

chapters, drawing from ethnographic evidence which has emerged during the fieldwork conducted for this study.

Other than this, however, the idea of “humanitarian exploitation” suggests that among the “undersides of humanitarianism,” there are peculiar modes of exploitation which are sustained and reproduced properly by asylum regimes. Following this perspective, the asylum seeker needs to be seen as a distinct “figure of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Therefore, studying the asylum seeker in the wake of the 2015 “refugee crisis” can be a fundamental exercise for investigating the European asylum regime in terms of a distinct infrastructure of migrant labor exploitation. Instead of considering and studying the asylum seeker exclusively in relation to reception facilities, and more broadly, in relation to those (para)institutional places of confinement, such as hotspots and first arrival centers (Agier 2019; Davies and Isakjee 2018; Kreichauf 2018; Tazzioli 2017), the idea of “humanitarian exploitation” invites an analysis of this figure in relation to a double intertwined spatiality: the space of reception and encampment more broadly, on the one hand, and the workplace, on the other.

What do asylum seekers do in their everyday once they have been “warehoused” (Vianelli 2021) in reception centers? What places and spaces do they inhabit when not in reception centers? What kind of work do they do? How does the European asylum regime contribute to their confinement within specific niches and sectors of labor? Do asylum seekers, as distinct “figures of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), truly constitute “free labor”? Where do asylum seekers live, and how do they work once they leave reception facilities? These are some of the questions that informed the design of my research project. As the discussion of the ethnographic material demonstrates in later chapters, asylum seekers often spend their daily life in between reception centers and the workplace. One of the central contentions of this project is that it is not possible to understand and fully comprehend the spatiality of the former if not in strict relation to the latter, and vice versa. In addition to these questions, I also ask what the concept of “humanitarian exploitation” adds to those theories on the exploitation and racialization of

migrant labor. While I develop a detailed response to this question in the coming chapters, here, I will schematically sketch out the theoretical-analytical premises that led me to theorize the humanitarian labor regime.

In a recent book on the European “refugee crisis”, Enrica Rigo (2022) argues that the European asylum regime does not merely impact on migrants’ mobility; rather, it also embodies a regime that reorganizes, in a lasting and pervasive manner, the social reproduction of migrant labor. Consider, for example, the fact that asylum seekers are often confined, sometimes for years, in institutions known colloquially as “reception centers.” During the fieldwork conducted for this research, I encountered people who had remained in these centers for four, five, or six years. In these places, asylum seekers are forced to live with strangers of different ethnicities and nationalities, subjected to pervasive and daily forms of socio-legal control and (bio)political disciplining, and are often subjected to a dietary regime imposed by the entities responsible for reception (e.g. social cooperatives). These are just a few aspects, which unmistakably reveal the pervasiveness of asylum within the most intimate spheres of asylum seekers’ lives. The autonomous space of household, the development of ethnic and family networks, the access to public care services—among the social activities and fields we usually associate with the making of labor—are partially replaced and deeply integrated with a new spatio-racial regime made by hotspots, first arrival centers and reception facilities which, to use Polly Pallister-Wilkins’s words (2022a), “debilitates life.”

In order to grasp the relevance of this shift, from governing mobility to a new spatio-racial politics of labor, and from households, families, ethnic networks, and public care services to the “archipelago of reception”—a network of various facilities, services, and support systems that are involved in the process of receiving and managing asylum seekers—I will elaborate on the theoretical suggestion proposed by Lorenzo Vianelli (2021) concerning the “logistical rationality” of the European asylum regime. In his article, he argues that asylum seekers are

objectified and are arbitrarily moved and warehoused throughout what he calls the “reception supply chain.” Following this perspective, I will argue that there is a *disturbing similarity* between how asylum seekers’ working bodies are reproduced in contemporary Europe and how enslaved labor was managed during the Atlantic slave trade (see Chapter 1 and 3). While it is not my intention to make a strict comparison between these two racial systems of labor reproduction, I rather aim to highlight the importance of acknowledging how the “logistics of asylum” (Vianelli 2021) implies a racial calculus which is not a novelty if we consider the intimate nexus between race and capital in a historical perspective (Mbembe 2017; Robinson 2000; Quijano 2000; see Chapter 3). Within the European asylum regime, asylum seekers’ human autonomy is systemically devalued, and thus these individuals are subjected to a regime which heavily influences their integration within the labor market (see Chapter 3). Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, I ask: what kinds of “figures of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) are reproduced through this “humanitarian labor regime,” a system which implies a generalized and long-lasting (spatio-racial) reorganization of migrants’ lives (see Chapter 3)?

Theorizing the humanitarian labor regime might help us to reflect on the hierarchies that criss-cross and structure the (racial) composition of class in contemporary Europe. Considering the fundamental insights provided by feminist critique of Marxian theory regarding the so-called social reproduction of labor (see Chapter 3), Enrica Rigo states that in order to comprehend the workings and hierarchies of exploitation, it is necessary to look beyond the workplace and investigate these processes in relation to a series of places where labor is reproduced daily (2022:79). Where and how do (migrant) people live? Which kind of access to material and symbolic resources do they have? To what extent can they nurture affective and social bonds according to their own needs and desires? Not every migratory regime, indeed, impacts migrants’ livelihoods in the same way. This means that speaking of “migrant labor” in

a generic manner can be misleading. Instead, it is of pivotal importance to analyze the specific living conditions of distinct migrant populations.

In order to offer an example on how different migratory regimes might impact the living and labor conditions of migrants in different ways, I briefly focus here on the Italian context at the beginning of the new millennium. During this period, migration policies toward Africa and the Middle East countries were already characterized by a series of legal and political restrictions (Colucci 2018; Dal Lago 1999). In order to enter Italian territory, for instance, it was necessary to possess either an employment contract or a fixed-term study visa. Despite this restrictive and conditional legislation, migration policy allowed a certain degree of freedom of movement. Migrants with pre-arranged working visas could choose where to settle in Italy, perhaps according to the presence of ethnic and familial networks that could support them, materially and emotionally, upon arrival in Italy. The journey would have taken place relatively safely, likely by air or by ferry (ILO 2022).³ This, of course, did not mean that migration was not accompanied by racism and/or socioeconomic marginalization. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2002) demonstrated, migratory projects, especially those linked to historical-political disparities of a colonial and racial nature, are structurally tied to enduring processes of exploitation and limited social mobility in the hosting country.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Italian context during the 2010s. In the wake of the 2008 global crisis, European migration policies became more and more restrictive (Caprioglio and Rigo 2021). For entire populations, it would have been almost impossible to obtain a prearranged working or study visa to come to Italy or other European countries. The only viable option remained entering the European territory as irregular migrants and subsequently applying for asylum. In Chapter 1, I will illustrate that in the wake of the 2008 crisis, European

³ Note that the arrival of migrant people from Africa, the Middle East and Eastern European countries from unauthorized migratory routes (e.g. from the Mediterranean Sea) is not a phenomenon emerged during the 2010s. These unauthorized movements mainly began during the 1990s as a consequence of European restrictive and selective migration policy (see Albahari 2015; Colucci 2018; Walters 2002).

migration policy was characterized by a dual tendency, which many have deemed a new humanitarian-securitarian paradigm (Albahari 2015; Fontanari 2019; Garelli, Tazzioli 2017; Mellino 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2022a). On the one hand, migrants are denied pre-arranged visa and forced to enter the European space as irregular people, thus conceived as a threat which in turns becomes necessary to confine and control (the securitarian side). On the other hand, at the same time, they are constructed as victims compelled to apply for asylum, in order to, temporarily and conditionally, regularize their stay in Europe (the humanitarian side).

This new mode of migration management led to a radical reorganization of the migratory journey of those *forced* to become simultaneously illegal migrants and asylum seekers. Before reaching Europe, this means relying on a series of informal and criminal networks that coercively manage the lives of migrants, subjecting them to more or less explicit forms of (sexual) extortion and brutal violence, repeatedly putting at risk the lives of these migrant populations (Achnich 2022; Amnesty International 2016; Global Detention Project 2015; Urbina 2021). Once in Europe, illegalized migrants who are forced to seek asylum continue to be subjected to a series of coercive conditions which are instantiated by the “logistical rationality” of reception (Vianelli 2021). Subsequently, this means that asylum seekers are arbitrarily moved and redistributed across the national territory throughout thousands of reception facilities. As such, they are partially yet structurally prevented from relying on ethnic and family networks and subjected to a series of conditions which deeply impact on their daily lives, as well as on their mode of integration in the labor market.

We will dig deeper into the repercussions of this new spatio-racial politics of labor in the coming chapters, especially in chapters 3. However, it is already possible to observe how asylum, or this specific European asylum regime, concerns distinct conditions of social reproduction of labor when compared to other types of migratory regimes, which may leave room for different degrees of social autonomy. From this perspective, asylum could be framed as a regime of social

destruction and organized entropy, on the one hand, and spatio-racial reorganization of life, on the other.

Reflecting on these spatio-racial conditions might help us to understand how the category of migrant labor can be cross-cut by hierarchies which are partially reproduced by different migratory regimes. My aim here is not so much to determine which migration regime produces worse dynamics of exploitation within the workplace. However, as I will try to demonstrate in the following chapters, the humanitarian labor regime plays a pivotal role in reproducing distinct figures of coerced and disposable labor which has contributed to an overall flexibilization and racialization of European labor markets in a specific political-economic conjuncture, namely the post 2008 global crisis scenario.

Moreover, I aim to show that it is crucial to reflect on the modalities through which the reproduction of disposable and coerced labor (which are endogenous to the humanitarian labor regime) is always mediated by exogenous factors. The category of the asylum seeker indeed implies a totalizing heterogeneity of ethnicity, gender, and class. It is thus important to think about the humanitarian labor regime not in abstract and universal terms, but always in its site-specific declinations (Novak 2022; see Chapter 4). As such, we need to consider how endogenous elements integrate with exogenous variables, such as race as embodiment (see Chapter 2), distinct national policies regarding asylum and labor, and the preexisting (racial) composition of class in a given workplace. As discussed in Chapter 2, asylum seekers from certain sub-Saharan African countries repeatedly reported during the fieldwork that their “Blackness” was one of the main reasons behind their socio-economic oppression (Allen 1994, 1997). Forms of racial embodiment, for instance, are not endogenously reproduced by the humanitarian labor regime. On the contrary, they need to be conceptualized as part of broader system in which race comes to operate as a socio-ontological and identity operator (Ahmed 2002; Fanon 1986; Pierre 2013; Saucier 2015), linked to the tragic global history of colonialism and its constitutive sediments in the postcolonial present (Mellino 2012; Mezzadra 2008).

Having said that, reflecting on the endogenous specificities of the humanitarian labor regime might help us to avoid a generic use of the category of “migrant labor.” There is a vast body of literature on the constitutive relationship between migrant labor, regimes of forced labor, racial composition of class, and the functioning of the capitalist world economy (Bhattacharyya 2018; Bonacich et al. 2008; Curcio and Mellino 2012; McIntre and Nast 2011; Merrill 2011; Moulier Boutang 2002; Piro and Sacchetto 2021; Quijano 2000; Robinson 2000; Roediger 2017). In this regard, a concept often used in relation to the racialization of migrant labor is that of “surplus population” or “reserve army labor,” derived from Marxian theory (Marx 1976). I will delve into this debate in Chapter 3, where I will analyze the relationship between asylum, race, forced labor, and the idea of “surplus population.”

What I aim to anticipate here is that we need to consider how distinct migratory regimes, which imply different forms of social reproduction of labor, contribute to give rise to different types of “surplus populations” and coerced labor which are hierarchically articulated. It is therefore necessary to analyze how endogenous factors of distinct regimes of social reproduction, and exogenous factors (e.g. ethno-racial statuses), so to speak, produce distinct, and “racially structured” (Hall 1980) formations of “surplus population” and coerced labor.

CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS? ASYLUM, WHAT ASYLUM?

As my research got underway, I began to consider a series of contributions on the “Prison Industrial Complex” (Davis 1995; Davis 2003; Hallet 2002; Gilmore 2007) as a way of exploring more deeply the relationship between asylum and circuits of value. Drawing on this literature, Deanna Dadusc and Paolo Mudu (2020) advanced the notion of the “Humanitarian Industrial Complex” to make visible the constitutive relationship between neoliberalism and the management of asylum seekers in contemporary Europe. In recent years, several studies have

demonstrated that asylum regimes emerged as an “extractive frontier” of contemporary capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019; see Chapter 3). During this period, I came across *Golden Gulag* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007). As I read and reread this text on the birth and development of the “Prison Industrial Complex” in California since the 1980s, I became increasingly convinced that its analytical framework could offer illuminating analytical insights in order to explore what has been termed the European “refugee crisis” (Marchi 2024).

In brief, Gilmore’s book considers how the “mass incarceration” of Blacks, Latinxs, and impoverished white populations was a solution, a political economic and spatial “fix” (Harvey 2001) which occurred during a moment of systemic crisis in the Californian social model which emerged at the end of World War II. Through new laws and comprehensive reforms of the judicial system, combined with specific racial ideologies already present in the U.S. society, prison emerged as a gravitational center around which variegated (financial) circuits of value developed and through which a racial social contract (Mills 1997) was re-established in a moment of social instability.

According to Gilmore, it would be inappropriate to state that in 1980s there was a “crisis of crime”, as one might initially think. Rather, crime increased because new types of offenses were introduced, reflecting both broader shifts in legal and political systems. Since the early 1980s, a series of social behaviours which were previously punished with measures other than incarceration (or even considered legal) started to be systemically punished with imprisonment. Therefore, Gilmore tells us, one has to consider the alleged “crisis of crime” in the 1980s against the backdrop of the systemic socio-economic crisis which arose during the 1970s in California. With the end of the Fordist model and the development of new forms of flexible accumulation, as well as the pervasive entry of financial capitalism into everyday life, “mass incarceration + prison expansion” emerged as an effective “spatial fix” (Harvey 2001), simultaneously political economic and racial, for solving the systemic crises of the 1970s. In Chapter 3 I will return to

Gilmore's thesis. Here, I aim to emphasize that *Golden Gulag* might offer an interesting analytical framework to understand the "refugee crisis" in a different light. Despite stark political, economic, and socio-geographic differences between the two contexts, I believe that her text could be an useful tool to look at the radical changes in migration management occurred in 2010s Europe.

As I will show in the next chapter through the story of Noor⁴, a Pakistani asylum seeker, it would be misleading to simply state that the number of asylum seekers' applications increased significantly in Europe in the 2010s. Indeed, one has to consider that the vast majority of individuals from Africa and the Middle East who arrive in European countries through non-"regularized" ways have been *de facto* forced to apply for asylum. In this perspective, the category of asylum seeker, like any migrant category, says little about the causes and reasons for departure and the subjective conditions of those who emigrate (Malkki 1996; Karakayali and Rigo 2010; Sigona 2017). Migrant categories, on the contrary, "reveal more about the conjunctures in the politics of mobility in which they flourish than about the people they label" (Scheel and Squire 2014:191). Following Gilmore's (2007) discourse, one might advance the argument that the politics of mobility emerged in Europe in the wake of 2008 global crisis is characterized by "mass refugification + reception expansion", or the implementation of a series of legal reforms and the emergence of series of practices of government according to which negatively racialized populations have been rendered in terms of irregular migrants *and*, at the same time, asylum seekers to be logistically moved through a booming "reception supply chain" (Vianelli 2021).

A similar argument is developed by Miguel Mellino (2019) in one of the most important books on the topic, *Governing the Refugee Crisis*. According to Mellino, a "new moral political economy" of management of asylum seekers' bodies emerged during 2010s Europe, especially

⁴ Note that all names are changed for the sake of anonymity, some personal details might have been purposefully obscured to protect the identity of interviewees.

in the wake of the 2015 “refugee crisis” (see Chapter 3 for the notion of moral political economy). In this regard, some have noted that the category of asylum seeker, despite appearing universal and race-blinded, conceals specific ethno-racial subjectivities (Espiritu 2014; Ong 2003). It is not a mystery, indeed, that the refugee question emerged as an issue in international politics in the wake of World War II. During that period, the refugee was embodied predominantly by white and European subjects (Arendt 1973).

With the evolution of the international geopolitical context and the end of the Cold War, the refugee category progressively assumed different ethno-racial characteristics; and today in Europe, this figure is often used as a vehicle for racist discourses (Picozza 2021). The refugee has come to occupy the position of racial-Otherness in relation to European identity and the European imaginary (Kyriakides 2019). In addition to the changing subjectivities hidden within this figure, however, one also needs to reflect on the modalities through which “procedures” and “technologies” of body government change according to evolving historical and political economic contexts (Foucault 1991, 2007, 2008).

In Germany and Italy, for example, the emergence of a reception system, comprised of thousands of reception facilities scattered throughout both nations, is quite a new phenomenon when compared with previous modes of managing asylum seekers. Previously, there were institutional centers for hosting asylum seekers, but they could only accommodate a few thousand asylum seekers in total.⁵ In the wake of the 2015 “refugee crisis,” on the other hand, Germany and Italy hosted in their reception systems hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and the number of reception facilities literally boomed to several thousands. The unprecedented expansion of reception, however, is not simply related to an increase in asylum applications.

⁵ Norbert Manns and Heiko Hecht reported that “in January 2005, a total of 11,431 beds were available throughout Germany to allocate asylum applicants, 4,382 of which were not occupied” (2005:6). In Italy, 6,284 people were in reception centers in 2007 and about 50 reception centers were operative in 2008, while 12,275 facilities were active in 2018 (Commissione Nazionale Asilo 2022; Open Polis 2018; Ghizzi Gola 2015). According to the most updated data, Germany hosted 398,585 asylum seekers, as of December 31, 2021 (asylum in Europe 2023), Italy 97,670, as of December 31, 2020 (<https://centriditalia.it/home>).

Even during the 1990s, for instance, in Italy there were tens of thousands of asylum applications, but no national reception system was implemented as in the 2010s (Marchi 2024). At that time, some groups of asylum seekers could settle autonomously within the national territory (Petrovic 2021), while other asylum seekers were granted *ad hoc* visas, as they did not meet the eligibility criteria to obtain the refugee status (Ghizzi Gola 2015). The reception facilities themselves, a heterogenous network made by former apartments, military barracks, hotels, airport hangars, containers, captures the *ad hoc* nature and rationality of the European asylum regime emerged during the 2010s.⁶

This new model of governing asylum seekers, which I briefly framed in the terms of “mass refugeeization + reception expansion” through a logistical rationality, could be critically explored from various perspectives. Some authors, for instance, have analyzed the financialization and privatization of reception services (see Chapter 3), while others have mainly focused on the differing temporality and strategies of migrants’ resistance within this regime (see Chapters 2 and 3). Here, I mainly aim to elaborate on how this new governmental model embodied a new phenomenon in the way migrant labor is reproduced. In other words, the humanitarian labor regime is a conceptual tool that seeks to make visible the emergence of a new spatio-racial politics of labor which has emerged in Europe in a moment of systemic crisis of capitalism, which required new disposable figures of workers. This process, in turn, led to the the overall flexibilization and precaritization of labor markets.

The question we must ask, following Gilmore, is why did this process of “mass refugification + reception expansion” happen precisely in this political economic conjuncture (and not before, for example)? Why have millions of people been simultaneously illegalized and then *forced* to apply to asylum, which implies a radical spatio-racial reorganization of life in turn giving rise

⁶ Other than Mellino (2019), on the change of procedures and technologies of asylum government in the wake of the 2015 “refugee crisis”, see also Kreichauf (2018).

to distinct forms of coerced and disposable labor? Why the European asylum regime evolved into a partly different “dispositif” (Foucault 1980) of government in 2010s Europe?

To answer these foundational questions, I believe it is necessary to read the “refugee crisis” in light of the 2008 global crisis. Despite significant national differences, especially between Southern and Northern European countries, the 2008 global crisis had a dramatic impact on the dominant European political, economic, and social order, representing an irreversible rupture within European socio-economic organization (Marazzi 2015). How did European states respond to this systemic crisis? Without delving into the specifics of this complex issue, based on some political economic studies, we can say that European governments followed a strategy of financialization and privatization of the economy (European Parliament 2019; Hermann 2014; Ryner 2016; Sarımeahmet Duman 2019) through radical flexibilization of the labor market, characterized by the introduction of new short-term contracts and the erosion of various forms of social benefits for (unemployed) workers (Lydon et al. 2018; European Parliament 2016).

These structural reforms were implemented to accomplish the imperative of an emerging “just-in-time racial capitalism”: that is, a dimension of capitalism characterized by contingent forms of accumulation and exploitation, often mediated through platform-based technologies and a logistical rationality (Andrijasevic et al. 2021; Cowen 2014; Into the Black Box 2021; Srnicek 2017), which intensify and rearticulate pre-existing racial class relations.⁷ In the wake of the 2008 crisis, the relationship between capital and labor entered a new phase, with the latter being brutally weakened in favor of the former, intensifying a process which had already begun in Western European countries in the 1980s with the advent of what some called the neoliberal “counter-revolution” (Virno 1996).

It is within this political and economic context that we must interpret the emergence of what has been termed the “refugee crisis.” As the former mayor of Leipzig aptly noted: “We [Europe]

⁷ On the relationship between race, capitalism, and digital technologies, see: Atanoski, Vora (2019), Benjamin (2019), Chun (2021).

don't have a refugee crisis. We have a housing crisis" (Penny, 2016), highlighting how the framing of the issue changes the nature of the solutions that might be pursued. To this end, we might add, in addition to a housing crisis, a crisis of guaranteed labor with regular wages, as well a crisis of welfare and caregiving services (Fraser 2017). From this perspective, Saskia Sassen (2014) asserts that the post-2008 era is marked by a logic of "expulsions." In contemporary capitalism, an increasing number of people are expelled from forms of social protection and abandoned to a state of brutal exploitation and socio-economic depletion.

The central thesis of this project, therefore, is that the emergence of the humanitarian labor regime, as a distinct spatio-racial politics of labor, needs to be read against the backdrop of the 2008 global crisis. This new exploitative regime, as I will argue, has contributed to the flexibilization of the European labor market in a moment of crisis of capital accumulation. At the same time, it has served to further implement the "expulsive project" of capitalism (Sassen 2014), with millions of asylum seekers excluded from social policies (e.g. public housing) and confined to the reception and encampment archipelago; which has become a crucial spatial "fix" (Harvey 2001) of value extraction and circulation, on the one hand, and of racial disciplining, on the other. As I discuss in other work, in a time of devastating welfare cuts, public funds directed to private companies engaged in the management of asylum seekers have increased unprecedentedly since the 2010s (Marchi 2024).

As previously mentioned, the reshaping of European labor markets into more flexible structures was not solely achieved by establishing a new class of negatively racialized migrants representing a general "surplus population." Instead, it is also important to consider the racial and spatial nuances inherent in the humanitarian labor regime. It is through the reproduction of this distinct kind of disposable and coerced labor that the relationship between capital and labor, a relationship which is always racially mediated (Robinson 2000; Quijano 2000), has been further rearticulated in the service of accumulating capital.

The function of the humanitarian labor regime in contributing to the flexible restructuring of the labor market will become more clear in the exploration of ethnographic material collected at Interporto Bologna, a strategic intermodal center within the European logistics infrastructure. Here, the emergence of the reception archipelago since the mid-2010s, along with the warehousing (Vianelli 2021) of hundreds of asylum seekers in the surroundings of Interporto, brought about a new wave of racialization of labor and contributed to the overall worsening of labor conditions. As asylum seekers began working in the logistics warehouses of Interporto in greater numbers, this worked to weaken ties of solidarity between foreign workers and ensured a comprehensive restructuring of power relations. This has led to a substantial deterioration in working conditions, in terms of both rights guaranteed by job contracts and by unions (see Chapter 4).

SURVIVAL AND BELONGING

While the analytical overview developed above may appear schematic and excessively rigid, I will attempt, throughout the following chapters, to make it more complex and nuanced through the discussion of the ethnographic material. From an introductory standpoint, however, I believe it is important to have in mind a series of theoretical and analytical premises that serve as the foundation of this research. By combining Gilmore, Mellino, and Rigo's analytical insights, I have tried to schematically indicate the necessity of considering the European asylum regime as a distinct formation of social reproduction of labor that has unfolded in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in the European context. The development of this formation could be considered a spatio-racial strategy aimed at temporarily, but effectively, addressing the systemic capital's accumulation crisis in Europe during the 2010s. In Chapter 3, I will delve into the theorization of the humanitarian labor regime, combining theory and literature on race, forced labor, social reproduction, and the spatiality of capitalism.

A crucial issue, which I chiefly develop in the second chapter, concerns the question of forms and strategies of survival within and against this new spatio-racial politics of labor. As some research on the topic has shown, for example, some migrants spontaneously decide to leave reception centers by initiating their own journeys across European borders (Belloni et al. 2020; Della Puppa and Sanò 2021; Fontanari 2019; Fravega 2023; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020). These experiences, however, are often marked by situations of socioeconomic marginality, illegality, and existential precariousness sometimes similar to those living in reception centers. In my project, I did not limit myself to an understanding of the living and working situations of asylum seekers within reception centers. I also focused on the life and working trajectories of those who, for various reasons, left reception facilities. When an asylum seeker leaves the reception facility, it does not necessarily improve his/her living situation. In many cases, migrants end up living day by day in makeshift shelters, undertaking a series of journeys in search of an informal and precarious income, as epitomized by the story of Katou (see Chapter 4.5).

We can say that asylum seekers often move, and are moved, in between two poles: the infrastructure of asylum, on the one hand, and what I call “counter-infrastructures of survival” (see Chapter 2). Recognizing the constitutive presence of these counter-infrastructures, I will mainly reflect on the modalities through which asylum seekers negotiate and develop forms of belonging and sociality, which are foundational dimensions of human survival. In light of the organized entropy and partial destruction of ethno-social networks caused by the logistics of asylum, I investigate in which terms groups of asylum seekers can develop provisional but indispensable forms of belonging, practices of affectivity and spaces of sociality that are essential to assure the reproduction of the migrants’ body-mind.

In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson (2000) elaborates on the ways in which enslaved Black people in the wake of the Atlantic Slave Trade and slave labor in the Americas attempted to

create autonomous communities of fugitives with the aim of ensuring new forms of sociality and belonging within a social context of “war on the black body” (Kelley 2000). The importance of Robinson’s work, I believe, concerns the fact that he emphasizes not so much the material level of these “counter-infrastructures of survival.” Rather, what the author seems to be telling us is that in order to survive in a social landscape marked by a racial imperative, it is necessary to survive from a psycho-social point of view, by seeking out alternative and autonomous forms of belonging and community. In this regard, Fred Moten (2018) has spoken about “black submarine sociality” to describe these communal and belonging networks that have gradually developed within the context of “slavery and its afterlife” (Hartman 2006).

Chapter 2 seeks to examine this dynamic further, asking how forms of sociality, affectivity, and belonging develop and articulate in light of the racial and coercive infrastructure of European asylum today. In discussing “counter-infrastructures of survival”, therefore, I will focus mainly on their anthropological dimensions. Thus, I argue that Blackness can function as distinct socio-ontological infrastructure that ensures the development and articulation of social and ethnic bonds. In this perspective, I will propose to look at race not exclusively as a device of socioeconomic and existential oppression and marginalization. But also, as an essential element favoring the survival of the specific groups of asylum seekers.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY

To comprehend and analyze the functioning of the humanitarian labor regime, it is necessary to be positioned halfway between the “field of asylum”⁸ and “the field of labor”⁹ (Etzold 2017). It is

⁸ For an overview on recent asylum and reception’s ethnographies in Europe, see: Altin, Sanò (2017), Sorgoni (2011), Sacchi, Sorgoni (2019), D’Ambrosio (2018), Fontanari (2015), Perazzo (2022), Pinelli (2013, 2018), Riccio, Tarabusi (2018), Vianelli (2014).

⁹ For an overview on recent ethnographies on migrant labor, see: Avallone (2017), Holmes (2013), Ippolito et al. (2021), Perrotta (2011), Ngai (2016), Sanò (2018), Sanò, Piro (2019).

essential to explore the spaces of reception facilities (and the functioning of asylum institutions more broadly) in relation to the workplace, and vice versa. To achieve this goal, I moved in multiple directions during fieldwork. First, I prioritized asylum seekers' lives and work experiences. Through in-depth interviews (Corbetta 2003) and participant observation (Semi 2007), I sought to understand and trace conditions and labor trajectories of asylum seekers since their arrival in Europe, while also considering their migratory history more broadly. In order to get in contact with asylum seekers, I mainly relied on a series of acquaintances and friends who were variously involved in the field of asylum (migrant activists, social workers, researchers), who also offered me illuminating insights on the (dis)functioning of the European asylum regime. As I will show in Chapter 1, entering the field and building trustworthy relationships with asylum seekers was not an easy task. My institutional role as a university researcher, as well as my ethno-racial status (Whiteness), did not facilitate my ethnographic practice. Albeit reflexive and decolonial efforts have been made since the 1960s to break anthropology's intimate connections with colonialism, race remains the elephant in the room of ethnographic practice (see 1.4).

In addition, I met with various figures involved in both the asylum-seeking system and those engaged in labor legislation and organization. I interviewed and spent time with social workers in reception centers, lawyers who supported asylum seekers with their asylum applications, migrant activists, researchers, and unionists. I attended reception facilities, community centers hosting migrant group activities, union offices, workplaces, meeting places for asylum seekers (e.g. cafés), with the aim of exploring how asylum and labor integrate in different geographic and social contexts.

I conducted my fieldwork in Berlin (10 months), Bologna (6 months), and Verona (6 months) for almost two years of ethnographic research. As I discuss in Chapter 4, I decided to conduct a multi-sited ethnography (Coleman, von Hellermann 2011; Falzon 2009; Marcus 1995) across Italy and Germany because the two countries implemented different, yet not totally distinctive,

strategies for exploiting the asylum-seeking population in the wake of the 2008 crisis. Although my work is not strictly comparative, it considers the humanitarian labor regime as a European phenomenon within the framework of “Schengenland” (Walters 2002; see also Campesi 2015; Rigo 2007), namely the progressive harmonization and implementation of a common European asylum and migration regime. I indeed aimed to reflect on the different modalities through which the humanitarian labor regime “hits the ground” (Chapter 4). As I have anticipated, one has to consider a series of exogenous elements in order to grasp the concrete functioning of this new spatio-racial politics of labor, such as the social composition of labor in a given workplace, the ethno-racial status of asylum seekers, variations in labor and migration policy, among other elements.

As I will discuss, beyond some important differences, there are intriguing assonances between the German and Italian contexts. Moreover, I decided to follow a specific research hypothesis. Given a series of coercive spatio-racial factors pertaining to the humanitarian labor regime, I decided not to focus on specific and taken-for-granted economic sectors (agriculture, logistics, gastronomy, etc.). Rather, I opted for investigating the modalities through which the humanitarian labor regime favors the capture of labor according to the specific economic necessity of distinct territories. In other words, if it is true that the humanitarian labor regime reproduces forms of disposable and coerced labor, how does this labor is activated and exploited accordingly to different territorial landscapes? Put is simply, if an asylum seeker is moved and warehoused for years in a highly isolated reception center in the middle of an agricultural enclave (Verona), in which sectors will s/he end up working? Conversely, if an asylum seeker is moved to a European capital, like Berlin, which kinds of jobs will s/he be doing? What is more, if an asylum seeker is moved and warehoused in proximity of a critical intermodal center (Bologna), will s/he end up working in the logistics sector?

I use the term “asylum seeker” to describe those migrants who apply for asylum upon their “irregular” entry in Europe. One might wonder about the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee. According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who:

...owes the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.¹⁰

To be legally recognized as a refugee, however, it is not simply necessary to cross an international border and apply for asylum to the competent authorities of a foreign country. If the application is subsequently accepted, the asylum seeker obtains an asylum residency document or other specific document (which may vary from country to country), and can be legally considered as a refugee. Germany and Italy have complex asylum legislations. In both countries, for instance, rejected asylum seekers can make appeals to various courts. This has given rise to a very intricate administrative and bureaucratic situation that some described in terms of “judicial opacity” (Fontanari 2019); situation which I framed in terms of a “humanitarian labyrinth” (Chapter 1). Aside from the very few asylum seekers who had obtained an asylum residency document, in two years of fieldwork I met various asylum seekers who, amid judicial appeals, bureaucratic delays and administrative errors, were not able to know exactly the status of their application. A rejected asylum seeker who has appealed their status is still legally considered an asylum seeker.

¹⁰ The 1951 Geneva Convention “was limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of the Second World War. The document contains the words “events occurring before 1 January 1951” which are widely understood to mean events occurring in Europe” prior to that date. The 1967 Protocol, adopted 4 October 1967, removes these geographic and time-based limitations, expanding the Convention to apply universally and protect all persons fleeing conflict and persecution” (<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>). Italy and Germany adopted the 1967 Protocol in 1990 (see: Ghizzi-Gola 2015 and https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=V-5&chapter=5).

According to international migration legislation and political consensus developed in the wake of the World War II, migratory movements are mainly divided in autonomous/voluntary (economic migration) and forced (asylum seekers/refugee).¹¹ As anticipated above, various scholars have criticized this partition, and warned against a reification and naturalization of this understanding of migration. In the next chapter, I aim to trouble the concept of “forced migration” by reflecting on a series of coercive elements at play when migrants arrive in Europe.

Therefore, my use of the asylum seeker category should not be seen as an attempt to naturalize it. Rather, I utilize this migrant category to insist on the fact that the asylum seeker is subjected to a specific spatio-racial regime of social reproduction which does not concern other categories of migrants and migratory regimes. As such, the “asylum seeker” is considered as a distinct “figure of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Moreover, as I will show in Chapters 1 and 2, none of the asylum seekers encountered during fieldwork ever self-identified as such. This category emerged more as an “etic category” used and reproduced by some social figures (social workers, researchers, activists) and was rejected by asylum seekers themselves. I will reflect on the stakes of what I call this “systemic divergence” in the latter half of Chapter 1.

One might wonder if and to what extent is there a difference between the European asylum regime and the humanitarian labor regime. In the following chapters I will alternately use these two concepts, in addition to a third notion (“the postcolonial asylum infrastructure”) to insist on the “coloniality” of the European asylum regime (Novak 2021; Picozza 2021). Michel Foucault famously defined a distinct system of government in terms of an apparatus (*dispositif*), describing:

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the

¹¹ For a genealogy of refugee studies and forced migration studies, see Sorgoni (2022).

unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (Foucault 1980).

The European asylum regime and the humanitarian labor regime, therefore, are not considered as different apparatuses. I develop and theorize the notion of the humanitarian labor regime with the conceptual and epistemic intention of re-signifying functions and scopes of a regime of government which is not usually directly associated with the organization of labor. Inasmuch as “humanitarian exploitation” (Rigo and Dines 2017) makes visible a constitutive relationship between asylum regimes and labor, the humanitarian labor regime is way to describe a new spatio-racial politics of labor, a distinct (re)productive strategy, which has emerged in Europe in this particular moment in history.

1. Troubling “forced migration”: Disturbing similarities in the Black Mediterranean

1.1 NAVIGATING THE HUMANITARIAN LABYRINTH

You have to consider one thing...humanitarianism [*l'umanitario*] is an invention, it is a creation...it is a form, like all forms it is a fiction enacted by those who put it “in form”...migrants *are forced* into this humanitarian form, which is the unique form at the moment...and this humanitarian form widens and narrows according to political contingencies...

— Giorgio, Interview with Author, June 21, 2021, Verona, my translation from Italian, emphasis my own.

Asylum is like a circle...they put you in, they start play with you and you don't know when you will be in or out of the circle...it's like a never-ending process...

— Mustafa, Conversation with Author, July 13, 2022, Berlin.

Giorgio's words, recorded during our first meeting in Verona, have resounded in my mind ever since. Together with other ethnographic material presented throughout this and the next chapters, they inform what I propose to call the "humanitarian labyrinth." For many asylum seekers whom I encountered during fieldwork, asylum was lived and experienced as a bureaucratic and senseless labyrinth from which it was extremely difficult to come out, and which heavily affected their lives for years.¹² Surely, this labyrinth is impossible to avoid, if we consider the fact that for about fifteen years (2008; see Caprioglio, Rigo 2021), the vast majority of non-white¹³ migrants have been forced to apply for asylum to regularize their presence in Europe (see 1.2). In order to begin to trace the complexities of this labyrinthine system, I will dig deeper into asylum seekers' everyday experiences in the coming pages and chapters.

In addition to the day-to-day difficulties faced by asylum-seekers, the concept of the "humanitarian labyrinth" also refers an array of epistemic and political antinomies pertaining to the European asylum regime. I use the figure of the humanitarian labyrinth to trouble the meaning commonly associated with the notion of "forced migration," which conventionally refers to causes and contexts of departure (IOM 2011, 2019).¹⁴ As such, the "humanitarian labyrinth" is a way to problematize the moral and clear-cut partition of humanitarianism in general, in which the division between perpetrators and saviors, innocents and culprits, good and bad, is crystalline and distinguishable (De Lauri 2019; DeBono 2019). In other words, this and the following chapters aims to demonstrate that different practices and technologies of coercion are integral components of the European asylum regime. I contend that the coercive

¹² Frantz Kafka ([1925]1999) brilliantly captured the labyrinthine nature of modern state bureaucracies in *The Trial*. For a reading of Kafka's *The Trial* in relation to immigration bureaucracy, see Bhartia (2010).

¹³ I use the term "non-white migrants" to make visible the racial constitution of the "European migratory question" (De Genova 2016). Various scholars, from this perspective, demonstrated that the framing and policing of a "migrant/refugee crisis" has emerged exclusively in relation to negatively racialized population groups in the long wake of European modern-colonial project (De Genova 2016, 2017; Mellino 2019; Picozza 2021; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2022a). As I will discuss in Chapter 2, by "non-white" I do not refer to any supposedly taken-for-granted or epidermic "whiteness" versus "blackness". Rather, I refer to a "racializing assemblage" (Wehelyie 2014) that crafts sociopolitical and cultural identities along the evolving, "malleable" (Christian 2018) and stratified realm of blackness-vis-à-vis-whiteness.

¹⁴ For a critical exploration on the notion of "forced migration", see: Fiddian-Qasimiyeh et al. (2014), Lemberg-Pedersen (2022), Sorgoni (2022).

dynamics characterizing the unauthorized (yet recurring) migratory “routes” (Kasperek 2016) towards Europe, which are often (problematically) depicted by politicians and mass-media in terms of smuggling and human trafficking (Stierl 2020), persist when migrants encounter European reception systems.

In recent decades, various studies elaborated on the exclusionary and violent nature of asylum regimes, which are based on a series of coercive practices, such as the arbitrary and prolonged concentration of people in (para)institutional facilities, for instance. Works by authors such as Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986), Liisa Malkki (1995, 1996), Didier Fassin (2012), Miriam Ticktin (2011), Michel Agier (2005, 2011), Antonio de Lauri (2016, 2019), Zygmunt Baumann (2004), Paolo Cutitta (2017), Barbara Sorgoni (2011, 2013), Vicky Squire (2009, 2015), Giuseppe Campesi (2015a, 2018a), Barbara Pinelli (2014, 2017, 2018), Polly-Pallister Wilkins (2015, 2017, 2022a), Maurizio Albahari (2015), William Walters (2011), just to name a few, variously explored the several facets—socio-legal, spatial, (bio)political—of these practices, which are a reminder of what I called the “undersides of humanitarianism.”

Expanding on the literature on the “undersides of humanitarianism”, this work approaches the coercive operations of the European asylum regime from a specific perspective. Combining the studies on the “logistics of asylum” (Vianelli 2021), the “Black Mediterranean” (Di Maio 2012), the founding relationship between race, space, and social reproduction (Weinbaum 2019), the chapters that follow reflect on *the disturbing similarities* which inform the government of non-white migrant population in the postcolonial European present (Mellino 2012; Mezzadra 2008). Simply put, I aim to demonstrate that those populations who are forced to apply for asylum are managed in ways that disturbingly resemble the making of coerced labor during the Atlantic Slave Trade and during the period of colonial modernity more broadly. I thus propose to consider the European asylum regime as a distinct spatio-racial politics which shapes specific

figures of disposable and unfree labor—what I refer to as the humanitarian labor regime (see chapter 3).

The humanitarian labyrinth also expresses both a sense of inevitability *and* insolvability pertaining to the European asylum regime. This sensibility emerged through a series of discourses and situations during fieldwork, which highlighted how asylum was experienced, suffered, and reproduced, often unwittingly and differently, by various figures— asylum seekers, social workers, migrant activists, asylum lawyers. The humanitarian labyrinth is founded on the understanding that asylum is lived as an inevitable and quasi-natural phenomenon and, at the same time, as a regime (of power and truth) characterized by a series of unsolvable and tragic contradictions.

How is it possible that something is simultaneously perceived as a sort of natural given yet full of unsurmountable contradictions? In her ethnographically-informed reflections on the political antinomies and racial hierarchies at play within the European asylum regime, Fiorenza Picozza (2021) notes how the emergency discourse, a central tenet of humanitarianism (Calhoun 2009), is normalized in the management of asylum seekers and how, in turn, this sense of constant emergency obfuscates and obstructs any attempt to structurally engage with such antinomies and hierarchies:

the focus on material urgencies and immediate management almost invariably leads to sacrificing more long-term political interventions. This “blackmail” contributes to a de-politicization of asylum, as well as the inscription of the refugee question into a perennial “presentism”, which relegates refugees to the spatio-temporality of always “just arrived” (El-Tayeb 2008:653) outsiders (Picozza 2021: 44).

The “blackmail of the crisis” contributes to the naturalization of the “humanitarian order of things” (De Lauri 2019)—a sense of the inevitability of asylum. When you are dealing with a

perpetual and seemingly endless emergency the last thing you do is questioning if the discourse of emergency you are immersed in has a sense at all. You focus on material and compelling tasks to the point that the (asylum) regime in which you operate is subtly rendered unquestionable, rather than as a historical product emerged out of a specific geopolitical and socio-economic conjuncture.

For instance, the common and recurring complaints brought to the fore by migrant activists and social workers about the structural limits of asylum—bureaucratic delays in asylum procedures, lack of funding, overcrowding of reception facilities—were rarely followed by a discursive envisioning of the necessity, or possibility, to develop a system beyond asylum itself. While I heard a variety of complaints about the European asylum regime, very rarely was asylum contested at its heart. In spite of (or thanks to) the structural limits imposed by the presumption of “insolvability”, the concepts of asylum and reception were there in the background and unquestioned.

According to Giorgio, however, asylum is neither inevitable nor necessary. Rather, it needs to be considered as an “invention”, an induced “form” which “widens and narrows according to political contingencies.”¹⁵ This is the primordial antinomy of the European asylum regime, which is about the fact that asylum is the unique legal option, “form”, available for the vast majority of non-white migrants, who “are forced into this form.”¹⁶ Giorgio firmly believed that any discourse concerned with the European asylum regime had to depart from this essential issue.

Giorgio is a unionist who offers legal and political support to asylum seekers who are in the process, a bureaucratic labyrinth that generally lasts for several years. A self-trained professional, he has followed hundreds of asylum applications over the last several years. From being involved in the asylum seekers’ preparation and support in sight of the interview with the

¹⁵ Giorgio, Interview with Author, June 21, 2021, Verona, Italy, my translation from Italian.

¹⁶ Giorgio, Interview with Author, June 21, 2021, Verona, Italy, my translation from Italian.

Commissione Territoriale [Territorial Commission]¹⁷, to the judicial appeal process in case a claim is rejected by the *Commissione Territoriale*, to the appeal with the *Cassazione* [Supreme Court] in case the appeal is rejected by the court, to the procedure for those who want to convert their asylum document into a working visa, Giorgio has developed a significant expertise in the “field of asylum” (Etzold 2017). Met through a common migrant activist friend, Giorgio offered me illuminating insights “from within” on the complexity of asylum, as well as on the structural relationship between asylum and labor.

When we first met in his office, our 4-hour intense exchange began with his reflections on the fact that migrants “are forced” to apply for asylum when they arrive in Europe. Before considering the intertwinement of asylum and labor—the main focus of my research—it was necessary to take a step back and examine the entrance into the “humanitarian labyrinth.” Since about 2008, indeed, European migration policy entered a new phase (Caprioglio, Rigo 2021). On the one hand, the vast majority of non-white people have faced unsurmountable barriers to obtain prearranged visas to reach safely the European territory. On the other hand, these people have been *de facto* forced to enter the European territory as undocumented and applying for asylum became the unique legal mean for regularization. Describing the restrictive and criminalizing US migration policy against Mexican migrants, Nicholas De Genova (2004) talked about the “legal production of illegality.” The illegalized subject, in this perspective, is produced through an interlacing of legal and socio-political factors. S/he does not fall into a given category; but rather, becomes the product of a specific process—both legal and social-political in nature—which contributes to crafting the overall image of peculiar figures of illegality.

¹⁷ In Italy, *Commissione Territoriale* is the office in charge of evaluating asylum applications. Accordingly, an asylum seeker can be granted a residency document (asylum, subsidiary protection, ‘special protection’) or his/her asylum application can be rejected. Once rejected, an asylum seeker can make a judicial appeal to the court of second instance and, eventually, to the Supreme Court [Corte di Cassazione]. Albeit different legislation and policy, asylum procedure in Germany follows a similar logic.

A similar tendency is at play in nowadays Europe, with non-white migrants forced to undertake exhaustive, lethal, and unauthorized journeys as a consequence of restrictive visa policies enacted by European governments (Pallister-Wilkins 2022a; Sheller 2018). These illegalized migrants are conceived of and reproduced in terms of threats—killable, confinable, exploitable, deportable—to the European societal and cultural order. This tendency, however, is intimately interlaced with another series of dynamics. Namely, these migrants are forced to apply to asylum to regularize their stay in Europe. This model of migration governance has been variously framed as a humanitarian-securitarian paradigm (Albahari 2015; Fontanari 2019; Mellino 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2022a).

In line with the colonial episteme, the European governance of specific population groups is based on the idea that Otherness is simultaneously embodied by a victim *and* a threat (Fanon 1986). Within this humanitarian-securitarian paradigm, indeed, the migrant occupies the position of a passivized subject in need of salvation and, at the same time, the position of a dangerous threat to European socioeconomic and cultural stability. The core function of the European asylum regime, which materializes as both national and local institutions and bureaucratized procedures, concerns the sorting between “deserving” and “underserving” illegalized migrants qua asylum seekers. By implying and reproducing racial hierarchies of lives (see Chapter 2), asylum operationalize inspections into the applicants’ life and body by the state (Fassin 2012), with the aim to divide those who deserve “protection” and “integration” from those who do not, consigning them to a state of illegality and deportability (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Asylum, therefore, functions as a highly bureaucratized system charged of distributing degrees of “deservingness” (Novak 2021b; Sozer 2019), which from a legal and political perspective turn into a conditional and differential access to the sphere of rights.

Migrants who apply for asylum cannot escape and refuse in toto the sovereign arbitrariness and bureaucratic violence of asylum (Sorgoni 2013); rather, they adapt and negotiate forms of

survival and camouflage within the system. A typical form of negotiation is enacted when applicants purposefully modify or invent, partially or totally, their life stories in order to increase their chances of obtaining a positive response on their asylum application, performing what Roberto Beneduce (2015) called “the asylum moral economy of lying.” A paradigmatic instance of the selective logic of asylum regards the “list of safe countries of origin”, which is regularly updated by European countries according to evolving geopolitical events. According to the updated list, for example, Tunisia is considered a safe third country of origin. Thus, migrants with a Tunisian passport who arrive in Europe embody the “ideal victims” of the humanitarian labyrinth. On the one hand, due to restrictive visa policies, they often arrive in Europe as undocumented people, and after surviving the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean, they must apply for asylum as a mean to regularize, albeit temporarily, their legal status. However, as they come from a “safe third country of origin”, their asylum application is most likely destined to be rejected. Are we not inside a perfect “humanitarian labyrinth”? A system which obliges a group of people to apply for asylum and, at the same time, it implies the systemic rejection of a significant amount of asylum applications.

During my fieldwork, Luc, a social worker employed in the area of Bologna, explained some of these complex situations experienced by Tunisian migrants. In many cases, individuals moved to Bologna from Sicily, having escaped from the reception facility some days after arrival because they were aware their application was destined to be rejected. The two options faced by Tunisian people—either becoming “illegal” and following informal ethnic social networks, or declaring a fake national identity and tempting fate with restarting the procedure of declaring asylum procedure—were similar for many other coming from so-called “safe third countries of origin.” These instances also make visible the ways that people who are forced into the asylum system exercise agency against it, as we will see in the next chapter. Far from representing a coordinated anti-systemic movement, however, these acts are examples of informal “counter-

infrastructures of survival” which systemically emerge in response to the system (see Chapter 2).

This humanitarian-securitarian paradigm in migration policy has a genealogy. Didier Fassin, in his work *Humanitarian Reason* (2012), noted how at the turn of the last century, a new paradigm started to inform the logic of asylum in Europe. From a concept which emerged from the political right which was based on the assumption that the refugee embodied an emancipated and autonomous *subject*, retaining his/her unique personal and political history, asylum progressively evolved into a moral right based on the assumption that the refugee embodied a collective and anonymous *body* whose (ambiguous) suffering required surgical verification. This paradigm shift, it has been noted, reflects geopolitical changes of the time. It is not by chance, indeed, that the “humanitarianization of asylum” (Fassin 2012) came to light in the wake of the end of the Cold War. This was a period in which, the European integration process gained vital force and, at the same time, a moment characterized by a series of migratory waves from East and South which impacted on European societies. In this sense, it could be said that this new, punitive and restrictive, paradigm of asylum emerges at a time when the figure of the refugee progressively loses its original ethno-racial characteristics (a white European subject) and takes on a series of ethno-racial connotations (non-whiteness). In this period, Fassin noted, “the refugee issue became subordinate to migration control policy, a process that began at the Tampere Summit in 1999 and was completed with the signing of the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum in 2008” (Fassin 2012:141).

This punitive tendency towards specific population groups has only strengthened in recent years. The policing of the 2015 “refugee crisis” is probably the most paradigmatic case signalling the structural intertwinement of asylum and migration policy under a racial and punitive rationality (Mellino 2019; Picozza 2021; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018). Fassin’s analysis, however, requires a clarification. Just like “the refugee issue became subordinate to migration control

policy” (Fassin 2012:141), migration policy became subordinated to humanitarian reason and to asylum. Since the late 2000s, indeed, the European governance of migration was characterized by an interlaced dynamic: of the illegalization of non-white migration on the one hand, and the “refugification” of illegalized migration on the other.

One cannot comprehend the illegalization of migration and asylum if does not focus on the political and socio-legal dynamics of the process of “refugification.” Giorgio, in his own words, wanted to insist on this point:

The fact is that many who apply for asylum are not eligible to get an asylum status. When they arrive here, many would like to simply get a residency document, but since applying for asylum is the only way for them to get a paper, we need to sit, think and invent together a plausible story to present to the *Commissione Territoriale*, so some of them might get a document.¹⁸

His attitude to insist on the foundational antinomy of the European asylum regime was a rarity during my fieldwork. At least, this was the case with social workers, migrant activists, lawyers, unionists, and researchers. These figures, differently engaged and active in the field of asylum, tended to internalize and reproduce the “asylum-migration nexus” (Castels 2003) as a given, instead of as, in the effective words of Giorgio, “an invention.”

I encountered this attitude of naturalization of the “asylum-migration nexus” (Castels 2003) in the meeting with Arianna, a social worker specializing in the legal assistance of asylum seekers. During our discussion, she heavily complained about the fact that many asylum seekers were in fact “bogus asylum seekers”, and because their stories and experiences did not meet the eligibility criteria, those people were most likely be rejected. In her perspective, these “undeserving applicants” were responsible for obstructing and slowing down the efficiency of

¹⁸ Giorgio, Interview with Author, 21.06.2021, Verona, my translation from Italian.

the humanitarian bureaucracy, at the risk of compromising the application of those who “really deserved” to obtain an asylum residency document. I replied to her observation by noticing that *all* these people had no “plan B” to regularize their status. This was the real problem. Arianna initially agreed with my argument, then she seemed annoyed by my point, which, in her view, was in contrast with her professional vocation to materially help those who deserved legal assistance. The exchange with Arianna exemplified a recurrent friction which emerged during conversations and interviews with other social workers. Despite the validity of my “no plan B” observation, I had the impression that my position was perceived as idealistic and unpragmatic, without concrete and useful ends; as if I could insist on that point only because I was not directly involved in the field of asylum. The situation was different, however, when talking with people who were, or had been, trapped in the humanitarian labyrinth.

1.2 THE STORY OF NOOR: “VICTIM” OF WHAT?

if forcing exists, it should rather be framed within the processes of categorization, labelling, infantilization and cohabitation that are put in place when migrants arrive in destination countries (Feldman 2012). By reversing the point of observation, therefore, one can see that people are forced to play the role of the asylum seeker, as otherwise they would be left out of the system or deported; that they are forced to live with other people they do not know (forced cohabitation) within the reception centers; that they are forced to abide by the rules of the system and be dependent on the operators (relationships of dependency and infantilization). Based on these elements, we believe that to be correctly understood, the definition of “forced” must be applied to the context of arrival and not so much to the reasons for departure.

— Della Puppa and Sanò (2021:5)

Noor is an engineer from Pakistan. He graduated from a prestigious Pakistani University and then moved to Tripoli, Libya, in 2013. Despite the unstable political situation in the wake of the

2011 NATO military operation that had overthrown Ghaddafi's military regime, he decided to fly to Tripoli, where he obtained a high-profile position in a multinational company. The company assured him a safe experience, and he settled into a secure neighborhood of the city. For him, that job was the perfect occasion to acquire specific skills that would have allowed him to go back to Pakistan with a solid professional profile. After seven months, however, the political situation in Libya worsened and Noor did not feel safe anymore. He decided to fly back to Pakistan, but he discovered to his disappointment that airplane connections were interrupted, and returning to his family was almost impossible. Some friends in Tripoli had told him that in Italy it was possible for him to obtain a working visa, and Noor opted to move to Europe. Since it was not possible to have a prearranged (working) visa, he was forced to rely on criminal and informal networks to organize his maritime journey to Italy.

Having survived the Mediterranean crossing and once in the hand of Italian authorities, he spent a few of his first days in an arrival reception center in Sicily. Afterwards, he was arbitrarily transferred by plane, with other people from "Palestine, Bangladesh, Nigeria and other countries"¹⁹ to Verona. Many of them had lived in Libya for years, which had had an attractive national economy for migrant workers until the 2011 NATO operation. Due to the political instability, most of these migrant workers moved to neighboring countries (Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan) in the following years, while a negligible percentage entered Europe via the Mediterranean route (Fontanari 2019). As an undocumented migrant, Noor was automatically channelled into the procedure for claiming asylum. Once in Italy, to his disappointment he discovered that he could not obtain a working visa and was essentially forced to apply to asylum in order to regularize his legal status. Moreover, his university degree was not recognized by Italian authorities and universities.

¹⁹ Noor, Interview with Author, September 21, 2021, Verona.

His asylum application was rejected in 2015. His lawyer contested the decision of the *Commissione Territoriale* [territorial commission] and appealed to the court, which granted him a “humanitarian protection” document in 2017.²⁰ As an asylum seeker, Noor had not been allowed to return to his home country, the place he supposedly escaped from. At the end of 2021, after an exhaustive and expensive bureaucratic process, he managed to convert his document into a working visa, which finally allowed him to go back to his family in Pakistan after several years of being trapped in Italy. Due to the Dublin Regulation²¹, he also could not settle in other European countries (Picozza 2017).

From his arrival in Verona, in 2014, Noor had not been able to work as an engineer. He thus wandered between employment in various “low-skilled” and underpaid jobs. He worked for years as vegetable picker in the southeast of the province of Verona, an extended agricultural enclave which seasonally attracts thousands of (migrant) workers (see Chapter 4.2). To reach the workplace, Noor cycled more than one hour early every morning and spent every day of the week, including Sunday morning, in the field picking vegetables with other migrants. He was paid 5 euros per hour with short-term contracts which declared only a negligible percentage of the “real” working hours (“grey labor”²²). Afterwards, through some Pakistani acquaintance, he worked “in black” as a gardener with a piecework payment of 30 euros per day. He then started

²⁰ Introduced in 1998 and abolished by the Italian government in 2018, “humanitarian protection” was a peculiar residency document issued by Italian authorities to those applicants who did not meet the eligibility criteria to obtain asylum or subsidiary protection, the two internationally recognised forms that can be granted to who applies for asylum. In line with other countries, Italy introduced a “humanitarian protection” visa, which lasted a maximum of 2 years, for those who could not leave the national territory due to grave humanitarian reasons: health issues, natural disasters, being victims of political instability or being at the risk of human rights abuses (Camilli 2018; Cir 2018).

²¹ The Dublin Regulation refers to a series of agreements among European countries which determine the “component” state for the assessment of an asylum claim. Albeit a series of criteria should be considered in order to determine the “component” state, the main criteria considered by European state is the assignation of responsibility to the state through which the applicant first illegally entered the territory of the Eu. For further analysis on the Dublin regulation, see: Brekke and Brochmann (2014); Kivistö (2013); Mouzourakis (2014).

²² By the term “grey labor” I refer to an array of working situations where the worker has an official job contract which in fact declares only a marginal portion of the real working time. This means, for instance, that a worker might have a working contract which officially declares 10 hours of working per week, while the real working time is 40 hours per week. “Black labor”, on the contrary, refers to a working situation where the worker has no official job contract.

a food delivery job for a multinational company, an occupation that he was still doing at the time of our meeting.

Noor's trajectory as a worker exemplifies a systemic tendency of devaluation and prolonged exploitation afflicting people seeking asylum. As outlined by Georgina Ramsay (2019) in her ethnographic research in Australia and Uganda, asylum regimes play a pivotal role in exacerbating dynamics of labor exploitation. Contrary to institutional and NGO discourses, which tend to describe labor as an empowering factor for asylum seekers, the integration of people seeking asylum into the labor market usually reinforces their socio-economic precarity, and serves to channel this population into highly exploitative and "dead-end street" jobs (see also Frydenlund and Cullen Dunn 2022).

Other than troubling the institutional narrative on asylum and labor, Noor's migratory history is instructive about how mobility regimes shape specific figures and categories of migration (Karakayali and Rigo 2010; Scheel, Squire 2014) and how, in turn, these regimes might differentially affect social mobility and migrants' living and working conditions. Through a working-visa system, he freely and safely travelled by plane from Pakistan to Libya, where he could benefit from his own educational expertise. The perilous crossing of the Mediterranean and the forced encounter with the European asylum regime caused a radical redefinition of his socio-legal status and coincided with an overall devaluation of both his formal and informal skills (Kearney 2004). As noted by Gemma Bird and Davide Schmid (2021), the European asylum regime fosters the interlinked processes of "primary" and "secondary" exploitation. While the former refers to forms of direct labor exploitation, the latter describes the variegated legal and extra-legal dynamics of devaluation which contribute to confine asylum seekers to specific niches of labor:

secondary exploitation [...] is linked to the practice of "dequalifying" displaced people and precluding them from fully accessing the labor market in the host country. Dequalification

operates both through official and informal channels. First and foremost, it is carried out through the refusal by state and EU officials to recognize a broad range of professional and educational qualifications, driving licenses and other certifications which would allow access to high-skilled jobs and positions. It also goes through the implementation of particular bans on the rights of those seeking asylum to participate in the formal economy. [...] Even in states where access to the formal labor market is legally possible, however, a second form of restrictions limits access for asylum seekers and refugees. This relates to the sheer fact of their physical confinement to peripheral spaces (Bird and Schmid 2021:13).

These processes of “de-qualification” and spatial confining pertaining to the European asylum regime are evident in the case of Noor. Arbitrarily moved to an unknown place like Verona and prevented from working as an engineer, he was *de facto* forced to enter specific “low-skilled” and underpaid local niches of the labor market for several years.

Overall, Noor’s case instantiates the interlinked dynamics of devaluation, exploitation, and “refugification.” When the humanitarian-securitarian paradigm is at play, illegalized people on the move are socio-legally re(pro)duced in terms of non-autonomous victims in need: in need of help and salvation, of accommodation, of education, of integration, of qualification. Asylum and the humanitarian logic level the immeasurable heterogeneity of migrants—in terms of class, culture, gender, ethnicity, professional expertise—and imposes on those who are within its reach the ambiguous status of a “suffering victim” (Fassin 2012:232). Once you encounter the asylum regime, indeed, you mainly count as a “suffering body” who has to demonstrate that you deserve political recognition by showing that your personal story is in line with a bureaucratized and selective conception of suffering (Fassin 2012; Sorgoni 2013; Sozer 2019).

While describing his migratory journey to Italy, Noor explicitly mentioned one of the moments in which he encountered the “victimizing” logic of asylum:

Noor: When I came here, I didn't know anything about [being an] asylum seeker, nothing about it, because I don't have experience, my friends...my family is not in Europe, I didn't know what procedure... My friends in Libya told me "you go in Italia, you can get visa for 5 years... 2 years and after that you can go everywhere", that's why I decided to come here...

Me: So when you arrived in Italy you didn't know that you had to apply for asylum?

Noor: No, when I had my commission, in *prefettura* [the provincial office of the Minister of Interior], the judge asked me if I have problems and I said no, I have no problems, my family everything is good...and so they gave me negative...

Me: When you did your appeal in Venice did you change the story?

Noor: No...no...why would I have to change it?...In Venezia, the judge talked with me for 10 minutes easy and gave me humanitarian protection, 2 years...²³

In his sincere spontaneity, Noor highlighted the foundational contradiction of the humanitarian-securitarian paradigm. Forced to enter as an irregular migrant within European territory and forced to apply to asylum to regularize, conditionally and temporarily, his stay. Once arrived in Italy his expectations to obtain a working visa were quickly disappointed with Noor being in an unknown place wandering through various "low-skilled" and "underpaid" jobs.

Clearly, I do want to deny and underestimate moments of suffering and dramatic brutality in the migratory journey of Noor. Rather, his story is a way to trouble the clear-cut partition, between perpetrators and saviors, good and bad, which is officially implied in the European asylum regime. Accordingly, elements of coercion and violence are at play only in contexts of departure, with European asylum regime being portrayed as an innocent system responsible to alleviate migrants' suffering (Danewid 2017).

As the story of Noor well exemplifies, things are far more complex and, to some extent, overturned. We can affirm that Europe is, in this perspective, invariably involved in the production of asylum seekers:

²³ Noor, Interview with Author, September 21, 2021, Verona.

Refugees are first produced politically through neoliberal extractivism and warfare, including the direct involvement of EU countries in armed conflict, proxy wars, the arms trade, resource extraction and labor exploitation. Second, they are produced legally, through a visa regime that, since the 1990s, leaves little possibility for most nationals of African and Asian countries to access the EU beyond submitting an asylum claim, as well as their continuous re-displacement via the Dublin Regulation which, since 2003, obliges asylum seekers to seek protection in the first Member State they enter. Third, their “refugeeness” is produced socially through practices of management and humanitarian assistance, variously led by the state, NGOs and self-organized support groups that inscribe refugees in repressive, instrumental or disempowering relationships (Picozza 2021:7).

The polymorphic involvement of the European asylum regime and European politics more broadly in the production of asylum seekers also reveals a series of continuities and similarities concerning the modalities through which migrants’ bodies are treated before, during and after the Mediterranean crossing (see next section). To conclude on this point, I want to ask: is it possible to identify, as the European asylum regime does, specific and isolated actors, causes and territories of coercion and suffering? Is it possible to clearly-cut affirm that Noor, for instance, has been saved by the European asylum regime? Most notably, what typology of “saving” is enacted by the European asylum regime (Marchi 2024b)?

1.3 A NEW INFRASTRUCTURE OF LABOR REPRODUCTION IN THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

In their studies on labor mediation in China and Indonesia, Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist used the term “migration infrastructure” in order to describe the “systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (2014:124). With this notion, they attempted to make visible the increasing proliferation of networks which sustain international mobility patterns. Instead of focusing on a site-specific place (e.g.,

departure/arrival site) or on a specific subject (e.g., the migrant/the company/the state), the authors analyzed mobility through the (in)formal integration of a panoply of actors, procedures, technologies, and forms of knowledge. They identified five dimensions of this infrastructure: namely, “the commercial (recruitment intermediaries), the regulatory (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and other purposes), the technological (communication and transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations), and the social (migrant networks)” (Biao and Lindquist 2014:124). Each of these dimensions possess different and sometimes diverging rationalities. From this perspective, the concept of “migration infrastructure” does not signal a stable and smooth system of mobility. Rather, it implies a contingent integration of heterogenous elements and forces, which converge occasionally in particular geopolitical contexts to prescribe specific forms of human mobility.

Drawing on Biao and Lindquist, Paolo Novak (2021a) reflected on the mobility management of non-white migrants entering Europe via the Mediterranean frontier. Instead of giving priority to specific actors, institutions, and spaces, he conceptualized these unauthorized yet recurring mobility patterns through the lens of the “postcoloniality of asylum infrastructure.” In addition to Biao and Lindquist’s framework, this analytical lens directly draws from both the “coloniality of asylum” (Picozza 2021) and to the “coloniality of infrastructure” (Axel et al. 2021). The former refers to the racial-colonial hierarchies which are reproduced through a series of interconnected spheres—cultural, political, and socio-legal—pertaining to the governance of undocumented migrants qua asylum seekers. The latter instantiates the relevance of infrastructural development in sustaining European colonial dominion and how, in turn, the operational logic of contemporary infrastructures is characterized by a racial rationality. Infrastructures, on the one hand, enable the free movements of certain populations, goods, information, and knowledge while forcing others to (im)mobile coercion, segregation, and neglect, on the other (Nemser 2017).

The “postcoloniality of asylum infrastructure”, therefore, is a lens that emphasizes the relevance of racial hierarchies in the governance of certain populations across the Mediterranean. It accounts for how specific populations are subjected to coercive mobility patterns, which also include socio-legal and political practices of illegalization *and* “refugification”, as well as to broader socio-economic situations of labor coercion and lack of freedom, which in turn are shaped by colonial legacies (see Chapter 3). Studies on the “Black Mediterranean” (Broeck and Saucier 2016; Danewid et al. 2021; Di Maio 2012; Saucier and Woods 2014; Sharpe 2016), in this perspective, have noted that the Mediterranean has historically embodied a sociopolitical space where hierarchically arranged figures of the human have been reproduced according to evolving and malleable formations of blackness-vis-à-vis-whiteness. In similar ways to the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993), the Mediterranean has historically been a crucial basin where racial differences have been crafted and put at the service of racialized geographies of capital accumulation and coercive regimes of exploitation.

As such, these studies contend that the contemporary making of deathscapes across the Mediterranean afflicting non-white people are far from being an “exceptional” phenomenon (Danewid 2017). Rather, they are a reminder of the relevance of colonial legacies in shaping contemporary forms of governance. Albeit sharing a common colonial imprinting, these infrastructures of governance towards non-white people evolve and are rearticulated according to historical conjunctures, for it is necessary to grasp elements of continuity and rupture. In particular, with the “postcoloniality of asylum infrastructure” we refer to the humanitarian-securitarian paradigm mentioned above. Paradigm that progressively emerged in the wake of the 2008 global crisis in terms of what I called a “mass refugification + reception expansion” model.

Thinking this new model of governance through the “postcolonial infrastructural” lens allows us to make a series of associations among actors, institutions, spaces and (transportation)

technologies which are usually dissociated and conceptualized as separate domains. In his work on the European asylum regime, Lorenzo Vianelli (2021) posits that a logistical rationality is integral to the reception of asylum seekers. Being dehumanized and treated as objectified commodities, asylum seekers are made passive, moved, and warehoused within what he calls the “reception supply chain”, as exemplified also by Noor’s migratory trajectory. During the fieldwork, unsurprisingly, several asylum seekers used expressions like “I was moved to...” or “they moved me to...” when describing their journeys to and receptions in Italy and Germany. “You don’t decide, they decide”²⁴, so told me Joud, a Syrian asylum seeker living in Berlin. The logistics of the European asylum regime, therefore, reveals a disturbing similarity between contemporary management of non-white asylum seekers and the Atlantic Slave Trade.

In the *Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten located the origin of modern logistics within the Atlantic Slave Trade, during which Black enslaved laborers, dehumanized and commodified, were reduced to the status of “logistical populations” to be warehoused, moved, shipped, sold, and exploited. In particular, Harney and Moten contend that:

Modern logistics is founded with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak. It was founded in the Atlantic slave trade, founded against the Atlantic slave. [...] *Logistical populations* will be created to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to connect without interruption, or they will be dismantled and disabled as bodies in the same way they are assembled (Harney and Moten 2013:92-91; emphasis my own).

Legally and socio-politically excluded from the human community, the making of these bodies as coerced labor has been an essential phenomenon in the development of the capitalist system (see Chapter 3). In spite of a series of important differences from the colonial period, it is disturbingly telling to notice that those populations who encounter the European asylum

²⁴ Joud, Interview with Author, June 25, 2022, Berlin.

regime are thought of as “logistical populations” (Harney, Moten 2013) that are crafted as distinct figures of coerced and disposable labor (see Chapter 3). Reflecting on the logistics of asylum, moreover, bring us to another interrelated issue. Indeed, those who move towards Europe are not only arbitrarily and coercively managed by criminal networks and informal intermediaries, but most notably, also by European asylum institutions. From this perspective, “the postcoloniality of the asylum infrastructure” (Novak 2021a) does not only captures an historical resonance between old and new forms of coerced mobility and labor reproduction, shaped by colonial geographies (Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2022).

It also makes visible a (geo)political similarity in the way migrants are thought of and governed by variegated and allegedly antagonist actors and institutions. In her work *Gore Capitalism*, Sayak Valencia contends that the brutal destruction and dehumanization of people is a driving feature of contemporary capitalism, in which “death has become the most profitable business in existence” (Valencia 2018:13). Mass-scale practices and scenes of human destruction and subjugation are particularly visible in border-zones, or in those areas of the world where the Global South meets the Global North. In these contexts, systemic brutality is alternately perpetrated by state institutions and private contractors, as well as by organized crime, which is not a simple bit player on the global stage.

On the contrary, Valencia argues, criminal organizations are crucial political actors, in the sense that they exercise forms of territorial authority within the irreversible “breakdown of the state” (Valencia 2018), and serve as pivotal economic agents, as they sustain global financial circuits of capital. Organized crime thus entertains a conflicting yet systemic relationship with neoliberal democracies in the management of deathscapes. The Mediterranean is a paradigmatic instance of how variegated political actors and institutions co-participate in the making of a deathscape (Casid 2018), and it reveals a disturbing similarity between how migrants are treated before, during and after the sea-crossing.

As we have seen, due to a series of factors, people on the move are forced to rely on a series of (criminal) networks to enter Europe; these migrant mobilities are marked by pauses, deviations, regressions, and (financial and sexual) extortions in which migrants are made passive and moved between a series of intermediaries, spaces, and territories. The Libya scenario, for instance, exemplifies this brutal and extreme coercion. Polymorphic and mutable networks, composed by organized crime, armed groups, para-statal formations financed by European, international and humanitarian actors, organize the spatial and social (im)mobility of the migrant population (Achnich 2022; Porsia 2023). In Libya, migrants are subjected to systemic various forms of extortion, confined in detention camps (which were significantly financed by the Italian government), or sold into slave labor (Amnesty International 2015; Urbina 2021; Stierl 2020). Who manage to reach Europe and encounters the European asylum regime, however, continues to be moved by others: by humanitarian or military agencies which operate at sea, and consequently by asylum institutions that warehouse them first in arrival centers and then arbitrarily sort them throughout the thousands of reception centers scattered around the national territory.

Clearly, I do not want to make a strict comparison between what happens before, during and after the Mediterranean crossing. However, by following Novak's notion of the "postcoloniality of the asylum infrastructure" (2021a), I aim to make visible a panoply of variegated and heterogenous actors, practices, spaces, technologies which, following a racial-logistical rationality, sustain the mobility and making of specific migrant populations. Such actors include various European institutions, their restrictive migration policies and their politics of border externalization with Global South countries, para-statal and armed groups, criminal networks, informal intermediaries, humanitarian and military agencies, and asylum institutions. Transit spaces, detention centers, hotspots, first arrival facilities and reception centers are some of the spatial knots of the asylum infrastructure. Trucks, derelict boats, military and humanitarian

vessels, buses and airplanes constitute some of the transportation technology of the asylum infrastructure.

The idea of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” does not simply refer to a specific system of mobility management. As noted by Enrica Rigo (2018; 2022), it is of pivotal importance to recognize that asylum does not only affect and organize specific forms of transnational mobility. The European asylum regime embodies an infrastructure that pervasively conditions the social reproduction of migrant labor. While arbitrarily warehoused within the “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021), often for various years, asylum seekers become the targets of specific politics of life management and reproduction (see Chapter 3). The autonomous space of household, the development of ethnic and family networks, the access to public care services—among the socio-spatial activities and fields we usually associate with the making of labor—are partially replaced and deeply integrated with a new spatio-racial regime made by hotspots, first arrival centers, and reception facilities which, to use Polly Pallister-Wilkins’s words (2022a), “debilitates life.” What does this disruptive shift, as proposed by Rigo, entail—*from the government of mobility to a new spatio-racial politics of labor?* Most notably, what kind of regime of social reproduction is enacted through asylum? What kind of “figures of labor” (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) are shaped by what I call the humanitarian labor regime (see Chapter 3)?

1.4 WHO SPEAKS OF “RECEPTION”? DECOLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

In short, if a French person talks with an Algerian, or a black American to a WASP, it is not two persons who speak to each other but, through them, the colonial history in its entirety, or the whole history of the economic, political, and cultural subjugation of blacks (or women, workers, minorities, etc.) in the United States.

— Pierre Bourdieu, Interview with Loïc Wacquant (1992:144).

The two boys tell me their story at Professor D'Agostino's house, behind the Massimo Theater. With us there is one of her collaborators, Marcello Amoruso, and it seems to me that we are in a police station. Not because of the setting itself, but because of the structure of the setting: three Western white bourgeois people, belonging to two institutions, the university and the media, facing two black, African boys who have nothing but their stories. On the basis of these stories, they are judged by institutions, and on the basis of this judgment, from refugees, they can become illegal migrants.

— Giuseppe Rizzo (2021:189, my translation from Italian).

On a sunny summer afternoon, I met with Maria in a reception center close by the city center of Verona. Maria is a social worker by vocation, and has invested a lot of educational resources to accomplish this goal. After a very productive conversation about her experience as a social worker, she introduced me to some of the asylum seekers she was in contact with. Aware of her “care and control” position typical of humanitarian borderwork (Agier 2005), she wanted me to have a direct and independent connection with asylum seekers. In this way, she told me, I might be perceived as external to the asylum system and the power dynamics at play, and I might be able to establish a more horizontal dialogue with them. Maria knew, for instance, that asylum seekers often do not talk about their experiences as laborers with social workers.

Despite her personal intention to develop sort of friendship relationships with asylum seekers, she gradually realized that a series of structural barriers prevented her from accomplishing this goal. In this perspective, a series of auto-ethnographic studies reflected on the structural difficulty faced by social workers in their attempt to develop horizontal and disinterested relationship with asylum seekers (Altin, Sanò 2017; D'Ambrosio 2018; Perazzo 2022). Albeit social workers might be moved by a “need to help” (Malkki 2015) less fortunate people, they possess an unequivocal degree of material and symbolic power over the individuals they serve, as they operate within and represent an institutional system which requires a series of bureaucratized and standardized procedures. As noted by Vanna D'Ambrosio

(2018) and Carlo Perazzo (2022) in their auto-ethnographic analyses, for instance, social workers often tend to reproduce a series of objectifying dynamics against asylum seekers even when their subjective intentions is the opposite. Thus, when Maria introduced me to asylum seekers by stressing that I was not involved in the reception system, she was trying to facilitate a dialogue free from unbalances of power typical in the “field of asylum” (Etzold 2017). Despite her commendable intention, which had some positive outcomes, I soon realized that my presence was not neutral nor impartial.

After a couple of months, I was with her in another reception center, a former apartment which hosted around five people in the suburbs of Verona, and I was introduced to Abe, a Nigerian asylum seeker. Maria briefly talked about my research project to him, and I began to say something about myself, testing the waters for possible future meetings together without Maria. Before I said anything, Abe looked at me and said:

Can I ask a question to you? Those questions you wanna ask to us, are they gonna solve something for our situation? You are doing this for you, for us nothing changes! Since I have arrived in Italy everyone is asking me questions...in *Questura*, in the camp, in *Commissione*...but for us what's the point? You are doing this for you, for us nothing changes...²⁵

I was not prepared for his reaction, but I knew Abe had good reasons behind it. His observations sounded revealing to me. They have haunted me since then, and made me systematically reflect on issues and limits concerning positionality and knowledge production. For Abe (and not only for him) I was just another white, privileged person who intended to “ask questions” and obtain information for my own interest. Whether a policeman, a social worker, a judge, or a university researcher: for him there was not substantial difference. I was just another example of a person

²⁵ Fieldnotes, August 11, 2021, Verona.

in a position of power, scrutinizing their lives...But for what purpose? Is it possible to produce anthropological knowledge able to, even if in partial and unstable ways, break the historical and structural affinities with other institutions—government, NGOs, the military, the judiciary—which are all involved in the management of asylum seekers? Is it possible to produce antagonist and counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge at all?

Nowadays, it is well known that the birth of the anthropological discipline is intimately tied with colonial conquests and European imperialism (Asad 1973; Levi-Strauss 1991; Trouillot 1991). The original stated intention of the field of anthropology—to know, describe and represent “the Other” —was indeed an important mechanism for the emergence and expansion of racialized forms of government and Eurocentric knowledge. Anthropological knowledge often went hand in hand, legitimized, mitigated, and naturalized regimes of power/knowledge based on the premises of racialized and gendered exclusion (Cohn 1996; Wolfe 1999). Among others, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has echoed this critique in her work *Decolonizing Methodology*, which characterizes the discipline of anthropology and its supposed project of “objectivity” as having an opaque and “dirty” meaning for indigenous communities. Such an epistemic and methodological preoccupation is particularly relevant for those sub-disciplines (like the anthropology of migration²⁶) which are often concerned with the study of migrant and racially oppressed communities. Asylum and migration ethnographies, it has been noted, are indeed “dangerously preceded by colonial ethnographies” (Picozza 2021:32).

In this perspective, as suggested by Nicholas De Genova (2005), doing ethnography nowadays means confronting with a series of structural dynamics which cannot be easily reconciled and which do not have a coherent mode of redress. This is particularly evident in migration ethnographies, which often implies an array of structural asymmetries between the researchers and the people they aim to work with. As a young ethnographer, during fieldwork

²⁶ For an overview on the history of migration ethnographies, see: Capello, Cingolani, Vietti (2014).

I experienced, for instance, recurring structural obstacles that heavily prevented me from accomplishing my subjective intention to build a horizontal dialogue with the subjects of the research. These asymmetries were mostly related to my ethno-racial status (see Chapter 2) as well as to the fact that I worked for an institution which is often perceived as just another facet of state power. Reflecting on similar structures of power at play in his ethnography with the Mexican community in Chicago, De Genova posits that long-durée racial-colonial hierarchies represent ethnography's "conditions of possibility" (2005:30-35). To take from Edward Said (1989:209), one might argue that nowadays in most cases, ethnography is a "postcolonial field": a field in which race structures—epistemically and materially—the anthropological practice.

I had another hint of the "postcolonial field" (Said 1989:209) during my stay in Berlin. I was with Ali, an asylum seeker from Eritrea who had lived in Germany for several years. Mariam, an Eritrean-German activist and friend of Ali with whom I was in contact with, decided to be the mediator, as he did not speak English and I did not speak neither German nor Tigrin. When we met, Ali seemed quite curious about my national identity. What follows is the transcript from my fieldnotes:

Ali: Are you Italian?

Me: Yes...

Ali: My father speaks good Italian...

Me: Why? Did he live in Italy?

Ali: No, because you Italians colonized Eritrea...²⁷

Ali's words were said in a gentle way, and we both laughed at them. However, they once again revealed that my presence had specific meanings for those I met during my fieldwork. Before the encounter with Ali, the Italian colonial history did not come to my mind, it was not a

²⁷ Ali, Interview with Author, June 29, 2022, Berlin.

relevant thing for me. But his words, as well as the ones of many others I met throughout my fieldwork, perpetually haunted and troubled my ethnographic practice, just as they come back now at the crucial moment of (post)ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Notably, Ali and Abe's words pushed me to reflect on the predicament of positionality and knowledge production. In this perspective, since about 1960s anthropology has undergone a "reflexive turn", when anthropologists began to consider the ways in which the knowledge they were producing was shaped by the methods they used (and how that knowledge could be used for colonialist and imperialist projects), and that the previous goals of "objectivity" and "cultural relativism", for instance, were increasingly difficult to defend as intellectual aims because of the inherent contradictions and difficulties of ethnography (Asch 2015; Venkatesh 2013). In the long wake of the "reflexive turn", in recent years new research paradigms have been developed with the ambitious intention of producing forms of an emancipatory knowledge that go against the grain of anthropology's colonial burden. The idea of "engaged" and "militant" research (Boni, Koensler and Rossi 2020; Gambino 2017; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013; Greco 2016; Herzfeld 2006), for instance, aptly summarizes a widespread sense of urgency among anthropologists and social scientists to take the side of the subjects of their research. This methodological necessity is supported also by decolonial anthropology (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019; Chilisa 2012; Eriksen 2022; Smith 1999), which aims to give a new voice to ethnographic subjects. Drawing from black feminism epistemology (Harding 1992; Hill Collins 2000) and structural constructivism (Bourdieu 1992; 1999)²⁸, this developing research paradigm questions the positivist partition

²⁸ Albeit "black feminism" and "structural constructivism" embody distinct epistemological paradigms, they both share the assumption about the fallacy of objectivity, considered as a modern illusion which conceals specific power asymmetries and (geo)political interests. Pierre Bourdieu, who is considered a major figure in "structural constructivism" noted that "the positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence papers over the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce" (Bourdieu 1999:608).

between an alleged neutral and omniscient subject (the researcher) and a passive and intellectually non-autonomous object (the ethnographic object/subject).

In *Decolonizing Ethnography*, a collective and dialogic ethnographic project carried out with the undocumented migrant community in a New Jersey city, Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) contends that antagonist and counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge can be developed when one breaks the subject-object divide that is characteristic of the modern positivist paradigm. This means that “ethnographic subjects can themselves be the source of theory, rather than merely the objects on which theory acts” (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019:11).²⁹ In this sense, Alonso Bejarano and her research partners make a call for a process of active and deep listening, on the one hand, and of “epistemological vigilance”³⁰ (Bourdieu 1992), on the other. Ethnographic subjects, in other words, are understood to be the most valuable forms of expertise, capable of providing foundational insights on the limits of certain theoretical categories. In this line of thinking, the researcher has a sort of ethical duty (Brightman, Grotti 2019) to perpetually test the validity of theory against the grain of an “embodied knowledge” which comes from the field.

Needless to say, this methodological approach is not immune from structural asymmetries of power that characterize ethnographic practices, as we anticipated in the pages above. From this perspective, Fiorenza Picozza encourages reflection on the limits of engaged research by insisting, for instance, on the racial constitution of the “postcolonial field” (Said 1989):

While it is common to ask whether knowledge production in this field can contribute to the border regime – for example, by endangering migrants through the exposure of their illegal practices – it is important to reverse the question: how does the coloniality of the border regime always already shape the conditions of our knowledge production? What

²⁹ Pietro Clemente (2013) developed a similar anthropological approach by considering people’s discourses as possible source of knowledge and theory rather than mere data to be interpreted in light of pre-existing theoretical systems.

³⁰ With this term, which is a cornerstone in Bourdieu’s theory of methodology, the French scholar referred to an epistemological and methodological rigor that one must adopt while doing research. This means that concepts and theories do not have to be taken as a given, as epistemic frameworks which have an absolute and universal validity. On the contrary, theories and concepts’s validity needs to be systemically verified considering power dynamics at play in a site-specific fieldwork (see Bourdieu 1992, 1993).

are the circumstances under which a person like me can come to be interested, sympathetic and committed to the experiences of migrants which embody the European contemporary subalterns par excellence? Which labels, questions and perspectives does coloniality push me to adopt and which ones does it foreclose? (Picozza 2021:32).

These crucial questions remind that fieldwork, with its power asymmetries which often possess a racial connotation, variously obstructs and contrasts researchers' subjective will to overcome these structural hierarchies which are necessarily implicated in the practice of research. In other words, the researchers' putative desire to develop forms of emancipatory knowledge in line with ethnographic subjects' interests, gives rise to a "problem without solution":

The self-proclaimed militant researcher manifests a sense of urgency and a will to grasp and overturn the social order through the acquisition of knowledge and through his/her research activities. This is itself a slippery assertion: knowledge is an "epistemological soap" and always escapes the attempt to become a mono-directional tool capable of solving political problems. Knowledge is, in fact, deeply rooted in social and power relations one thinks to subvert by acquiring it (Grappi 2013:321).

Grappi's epistemic observation reminds that knowledge is always somehow independent from the subjective intentions of those who produce it. This is to say that doing militant or decolonial research remains an open and inconsistent process, which is characterized by a sense of tension and ambiguity. To take from the pioneering work of W.E.B. du Bois (2000), one might argue that doing militant and decolonial research equals assuming an "hesitant" posture.

Adopting such an "hesitant" posture, I want to reflect here on a series of ethnographic data. Drawing from decolonial ethnography's insights, I propose to listen ethnographic subjects as asylum's experts. In particular, I aim to test the sense and validity of certain asylum' categories (e.g. "asylum seeker", "reception") against the grain of embodied knowledge emerged in everyday conversations and interviews with ethnographic subjects. During fieldwork, indeed, I

progressively started to realize that there was a “systemic divergence” in the way the asylum regime, with its official categories, was portrayed, depicted, and reproduced. Over almost two years of ethnographic research, I could observe that asylum seekers never use the concept of “asylum seeker” to describe themselves. For instance, many people from Sub-Saharan countries tended to self-identity as “Blacks” (see Chapter 2), while migrants from the Middle East (mainly Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria), like Noor, for instance, usually identified more closely with their nationality. Some other people, most notably, did not subscribe to any categories for the purposes of self-identification.³¹ On the other hand, social workers, asylum lawyers, migrant activists, and researchers tended to use the asylum seeker category in a quasi-natural fashion—as if, despite the immeasurable ethno-cultural diversity of undocumented people forced to apply for asylum, that category constituted a consistent and veritable concept to describe these people.

This politics of refusal implicitly enacted by ethnographic subjects also concerned those institutional spaces where asylum seekers live while waiting a response on their asylum application. In Germany, these are mainly divided in Initial Reception Centers, Shared Accommodation, and Decentralized Accommodation Centers.³² In Italy, we have Emergency Reception Centers and Reception and Integration System.³³ Accommodation, integration, reception: these are some of the official and institutional tropes used to describe living spaces for asylum seekers. These worlds also reflect a broader moral horizon which is reproduced, and naturalized, by a series of actors involved in the field of asylum, such NGOs, cooperatives, international and national agencies.

³¹ Note that in anthropology “emic” refers to the point of view of the ethnographic subjects, how they make sense of themselves and of the social reality they live in, which categories and labels they use to self-identification and to describe their own everyday life. “Etic”, on the contrary, pertains to the categories used by the social scientist to describe specific (group of) subjects and their social universe (see Headland, Pike and Harris 1990). Emic and etic perspectives do not necessarily diverge. However, when they systematically conflict, as in the case of my research project, it might be interesting to dig deeper into this friction and excavate possible political and theoretical issues at stake.

³² Official nomenclature in German is respectively *Aufnahmeeinrichtung* and *Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte*.

³³ Official nomenclature in Italy is respectively *Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria* (CAS) and *Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione* (SAI).

Interestingly, however, none of the asylum seekers whom I met during my fieldwork ever named those facilities by using the official nomenclature. Most notably, albeit local and national differences between Berlin, Bologna, and Verona, I progressively realized that asylum seekers employed a recurring trope to describe the places where they lived: “the camp.” Notwithstanding the geographical and subjective heterogeneity characterizing my fieldwork, the idea of the camp perpetually resonated in discussions with asylum seekers. On the one hand, I was in contact with a series of figures that employed the moral lexicon of asylum— asylum seekers, accommodation, reception, integration—in a kind of a quasi-natural fashion. On the other hand, the people that were the target of this moral discourse indirectly yet systemically denied the very moral meaning of the system.

How could we interpret (Geertz 1973) this systemic divergence in the way the asylum regime is framed? In this perspective, one might ask: Who speaks of reception? What kind of—cultural, economic, political, symbolic—interests are pursued through the moral horizon of reception? What does this moral horizon make visible and what, by contrast, does it conceal? Does it make sense at all to talk about reception? Or, by following the systemic refusal enacted by the ethnographic subjects, should we use different categories, discourses, and theories?

Michel Foucault once reflected on the ambiguities of the prison institution. While prison’s moral and official discourse is the reduction of criminality and the reintegration of inmates into the society, the carceral institution, more often than not, produces opposite outcomes, and nonetheless “the failure of the prison has always been accompanied by its maintenance” (Foucault 1979:272). According to Foucault, however, the discrepancy between the official function of an institution and the effective outcome should not be considered in terms of a simple failure. On the contrary, one should consider outcomes as showing the true yet scandalous function of that institution:

perhaps one should reverse the problem and ask oneself what is served by the failure of the prison; what is the use of these different phenomena that are continually being criticized; the maintenance of delinquency, the encouragement of recidivism, the transformation of the occasional offender into a habitual delinquent, the organization of a closed milieu of delinquency. [...] the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them (Foucault 1979: 272).

What if one applies the same analytical lens to the functioning of reception, by asking, for instance, what is served by the failures of the reception system?³⁴

An example of what might be considered as a “reception failure” concerns the relationship between asylum and labor. As we have seen with the story of Noor and as we will see in more ethnographic details in chapter 4, asylum seekers generalized and prolonged forms of exploitation represents a concrete demonstration that labor does not represent an empowering sphere for the seeking asylum population. While asylum institutions, policy makers and NGOs relentlessly affirm that labor is an empowering factor for asylum seekers that favors their independence (Zetter, Ruadel 2018), their everyday experience seems to betray this discourse (Ramsay 2019). Following Foucault’s insight, therefore, functions, aims and scopes of a given institution should be considered by looking at their concrete effects and outcomes on the social body, rather than aprioristically accept the official and moral discourse of a given institution. The humanitarian labor regime, from this perspective, is was to radically re-signify the functions of the European asylum regime by focusing both on its “instrumental effects” (Foucault 1979) as well as by actively listening the voices of those ethnographic subjects who, as we have seen, implicitly refused the moral and normative register of the asylum regime and of “reception.”

³⁴ Lorenzo Vianelli (2017), for instance, broadly explored the instrumental function of “failure” in relation to the working of the European asylum regime.

2. “We the Blacks.” Humanitarianism, race, and survival.

2.1 “WE THE BLACKS”: UNVEILING THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY BLACKNESS

In states that are racially conceived, ordered, administered, and regulated, the racial state could be said to be everywhere. And simultaneously seen nowhere. It (invisibly) defines almost every relation, shapes all but every interaction, contours virtually all intercourse. It fashions not just the said and the sayable, the done and the doable, possibilities and impermissibilities, but penetrates equally the scope and quality, content and character of social silences and presumptions. *The state in its racial reach and expression is thus at once super-visible in form and force and thoroughly invisible in its osmotic infusion into the everyday* (Essed 1991), its penetration into common sense, its pervasion (not to mention perversion) of the warp and the weave of the social fabric.

— David Theo Goldberg (2002:98, emphasis my own).

During my fieldwork in Verona, I used to attend the weekly meeting of a grassroots association named *Pink Refugees*. The association aims to assure and favor a safe social space for migrant people, mainly from the LGBTQ+ community, offering also legal support to those trapped in the asylum procedure. Born in the early 1990s with the aim to support LGBTQ+ people and their cause in a hostile environment like Verona, a city known nationwide for its far-right and

neo-fascist culture (Del Medico 2004), the *Pink Refugees* had oriented its focus over the last decade towards the social and legal support of migrants, mainly from the LGBTQ+ community. Over the summer, *Pink Refugees'* activists, regulars and friends met in a sports ground close to the city center. As outlined by Franco, one of the *Pink Refugees'* oldest members, due to recent societal changes the migrant question became urgent, while the issue of gender discrimination remained an overlooked dimension of the mutating constellation of migrant and anti-racist groups in the Italian scenario. With no surprise, then, I met with asylum seekers coming from Trento, Bologna, Bergamo, and Milano, who had traveled here expressly for this LGBTQ+ gathering. The *Pink Refugees* network reaches southern Italy, with migrants coming from Roma, Napoli and other areas more than a half-day commute from Verona.

One Tuesday afternoon, I was introduced to Daniel, a Nigerian asylum seeker living in a small town close-by Milan. That day, he took a day off from his food delivery job to join the *Pink Refugees* weekly gathering. Having arrived in Italy in May 2017, his asylum application was still pending at the time of our meeting (July 2021). Since his arrival in Italy, Daniel had been moved throughout various “camps” and was eventually relocated to a reception center in a small-town close-by Milan.

While Daniel was talking about the “camp” he lived in, a former hotel which hosted about 15 asylum seekers, I distractedly asked him: “do you like living there?” As I had already heard several complaints about living situations in “camps”—the bad quality of the food provided by social cooperatives, overcrowding, lack of services, poor hygienic conditions, and frictions with social workers—I remained disoriented when Daniel, in a very succinct way, replied to my question: “Yes, it is good.” Surprised by his simple and clear-cut answer, I automatically asked him: “Is it good?” Very calm and sure of his own words, he then told me:

Yes...it is good...I have no choice. You know, I have no choice...Because, you know, in Italy there is something that, *we the Blacks*, sorry to say, *we don't have enough privilege like*

the way you have. So, like me, I don't complain too much, because I believe in hard work, I always go to my work, because I am a rider, I do delivery. I always go to my work so...when the other people complain I don't complain...I don't really like the place but I have no choice.³⁵

The interview shifted to everyday racism and how Daniel experienced being Black in Italy. He added:

Generally, Italian people are forty per cent good, sixty per cent are not good, with *the Blacks*... I am a rider, I am working...If I am coming to your house, I am coming to deliver food to you, food that you want to eat...I am the one taking it to you. I would just knock and I press your bell...“Ciao sono qui, Daniel, deliveroo, sono qui rider.” First of all the Italians say “cazzo”, insult me...Some of them, not all. “Vieni sopra”, don't say the floor...they would not say anything...later I press the bell they say me “monkey.” Not all of them [sic]. But you know, it's not their fault, they do not know what they are doing...*We the Blacks* are important, especially due to this coronavirus...we are important, I am still working with Deliveroo, Glovo, Uber, JustEat...All of them. I can work maybe two hours with Glovo, I can work 2 hours with JustEat, because it's movement. I have my electric bicycle...some Italians are very good, some are bad...some are very racist.³⁶

During the interview, Daniel systemically self-identified as a Black person, though always in plural and collective terms: “We the Blacks.” Moreover, he never self-identified as an asylum seeker, nor did he mention his nationality. In some passages of the interview, most notably, the reference to Blackness was openly related to (my) Whiteness: “We the Blacks, sorry to say, we don't have enough privilege like the way you have.”

Similarly, in Bologna several asylum seekers from some Sub-Saharan countries often talked about themselves as “Blacks.” At the end of an informal strike at Interporto organized by *Coordinamento Migranti Bologna*, a grassroots migrant support organization, I accompanied Hawa, an asylum seeker from Mali, back to the Bologna central station by car. Before leaving,

³⁵ Daniel, Interview with Author, July 20, 2021, Verona, emphasis my own.

³⁶ Daniel, Interview with Author, July 20, 2021, Verona, emphasis my own.

he decided to stay with me in the car and called the employment agency on speakerphone. In accordance with other asylum seekers who were on strike, he informed the employment agency that he would have not gone to work the coming night for his usual shift of 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.

The call lasted for about fifteen minutes, with the agency's employee intimidating Hawa about the possibility of losing the job should he decided to strike the coming night. Firm on his decision, Hawa repeatedly replied that "we young Blacks" [*noi giovani neri*] were very tired and sick of the working conditions, and that they had had enough of being duped with false promises of getting long-term and more guaranteed contracts. The expression used by Hawa during the call echoed Daniel's use of the collective "We the Blacks" during his interview with me in Verona.

Me and Hawa used to meet weekly in the same café in the center of Bologna, a gathering point for Black people, before his night shifts at Interporto. Once, Hawa complained about his exhausting, short-term and poorly remunerated job. Italians working in the same warehouse had better working conditions—day shifts, two days-off, long-term and guaranteed contracts—and oversaw Black asylum seekers during night shifts. He looked at me and in a bittersweet way concluded: "You Whites [*voi bianchi*] are paid better than us."³⁷ Having been in Europe since 2014 and having taken on various underpaid and highly exploitative jobs, Hawa did not need any other empirical evidence to clearly cut affirm that "Whites are paid better than Blacks." Despite me and Hawa having built a close relationship, which continued after my fieldwork, his words subtly reminded me that there was something structural dividing our social experiences, something which did not depend exclusively on my, and his, subjective will.

Some weeks later, I was at the same café with Musa, a Nigerian asylum seeker, Lamin and Issa, asylum seekers from Gambia and Mali (respectively). Musa complained about the working conditions at Interporto; in particular, he expressed that the "Blacks" were racially discriminated

³⁷ Hawa, conversation with Author, February 8, 2022, Bologna, my translation from Italian.

against not only by Italians, but also by some migrant workers coming from Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. The “Blacks” worked as porters, and were in charge of filling in trucks with packages and parcels during the night shift. Italian or North African supervisors were responsible for controlling the porters’ jobs, monitoring their pace of work, and giving permission to take a 15-minute break or to go the toilet during their shift. Musa explicitly reported that some Northern African supervisors were openly racist with Black workers, insulting them by using the Italian word “negro.” At the end of his detailed explanation on the racial organization of labor at Interporto (see Chapter 3), Musa looked at me and affirmed: “We don’t have the power, they have the power.”³⁸ The tone of his voice was not desperate and hopeless, nor was there a tragic pathos in his conclusive observations. Rather, in my view, his assertion sounded like a notary assessing a deed. Musa was registering and reporting a fact, an objective situation in which he, along with many other “Blacks,” was involved.

These are just some of the several ethnographic insights on “the politics of everyday Blackness”³⁹ emerged during the fieldwork. Like a specter, this politics accompanied me over almost two years of fieldwork. In daily situations (interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation), I noticed that many Sub-Saharan asylum seekers self-identified as “Blacks.” These everyday interactions serve as a compelling testament to their deliberate use of Blackness to frame their lived experiences and identity. The “politics of everyday Blackness” was an unconsidered element during the research design process and pushed me to further reflect on the relationship between race, being, identity, and belonging, as well as on the foundational tension between race and the universalizing logic of humanitarianism (see 2.3 and 2.4).

³⁸ Musa, conversation with Author, February 20, 2022, Bologna.

³⁹ I use this concept in a similar way to that developed by Gladis Mitchell-Waltour’s book (2017), *The Politics of Blackness*, in which the author ethnographically explores Afro-Brazilian people’s self-identification as Blacks in contemporary Brazil. Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri (2022) did a similar operation by investigating how people make sense and negotiate the racial imaginary across Italy and the US.

As the social experiences of Daniel, Hawa and Musa (among others) indicate, Blackness seems to hold a complex and dualistic significance. On the one hand, it is regarded as a decisive element in the social oppression and subjugation of Black people (Allen 1994, 1997). On the other hand, however, it is openly acknowledged and considered a crucial aspect of one's own identity. Blackness, in other words, seems to designate both a sense of "collective identity" and simultaneously a matrix of "common oppression" (Shelby 2002). The poet Jamaica Kinkaid (1992) brilliantly captured this ambivalence in her poem *Blackness*, where she posited that Blackness "harms and heals the Black individual at the same time" (quoted in Wright 2004:2).

Talking about Blackness in terms of (collective) identity implies examining the contentious relationship between being Black and one's sense of identity. Clearly, defining Blackness in relation to being and selfhood is a complicated task. Various scholars have attempted to elaborate on this intricate nexus in the wake of the colonial encounter, racial slavery, diasporic spaces and anti-Black politics (Fanon 1986; Du Bois 2007; Gilroy 1992; Mbembe 2017; Moten 2017, 2018; Saucier 2015; Sharpe 2015; Wilderson 2017; Wright 2004). Being Black, these studies suggest, implies confronting with a series of painful and paradoxical-alike situations because Blackness has been relentlessly reproduced as the symbol of a denied humanity counterposed to the White modern subject. At the same time, this literature acknowledges the fact that being Black does not simply mean being passively subjugated to the White machinic desire of annihilating the Black body. On the contrary, Black people have developed over time and space forms of belonging, consciousness, and cultivated constellations of "black submarine sociality" (Moten 2018) which enabled the reproduction of Black communities in a social context of "war on the Black body" (Kelley 2000; see section 2.3).

From this perspective, in line with Paul K. Saucier's (2015; see also Ahmed 2002; Alcoff 1999; Saldanha 2006) ethnographically-informed theoretical framework, I propose to consider Blackness, and race in general, as constituting and shaping the sphere of being in relation to

packaging one's identity. To be more precise, since Blackness is a matter of identity, it also implies an ontological horizon. Saucier aims to deconstruct the idea, often promoted also by critical race studies, that Blackness and race would simply embody a series of discourses external to the self: "because race is typically understood solely as an ideology, a discourse, or a discursive act, it often gets translated as a merely cultural representation and performance of certain people, and not as the people themselves" (Saucier 2015: 4). When Daniel, Hawa, and Musa said "We the Blacks", were they not also saying "We *are* Blacks"?

To be clear on this point, this theoretical positioning should not be confused or charged with the "biologizing" of the social construct of race. On the contrary, based on a social ontology approach (Ahmed 2002; Haslanger 2012; Fanon 1986), Saucier elaborated on the modalities through which Blackness, as a concrete declination of modern identity, necessarily pertains to the sphere of being:

The connection between identity and ontology is fabulously detailed by philosopher Mabogo More when he states, "Since questions of identity naturally imply beings' relation to itself, they ultimately become ontological questions of being, essence, and meaning which then take the form of 'What am I?'" (2012:26). With certainty, questions about identity immediately throw us into the realm of ontology (Saucier 2015:6).

To use an atmospheric metaphor, race might be seen not as a "cold" category, namely a simple ideological construct external to selfhood and to the way that subjects make sense of their own being (in the world). On the contrary, I propose to consider race as a "warm" construct, which necessarily implies specific forms of subjective embodiment (Hook 2008).

As far as this project is concerned, "the politics of everyday Blackness" will be analyzed in relation to three different topics. First, I will explore the contentious relationship between asylum, Blackness and non-Whiteness. In particular, I aim to elaborate on the discrepancies between an emic and subjective embodiment of Blackness and an etic construction of

Blackness or non-Whiteness mediated by asylum (De Genova 2017; Picozza 2021). Second, by attending to Blackness as subjective embodiment, thus implying evolving constellations of “Black ethnicity” (Hall 2021), I attempt to reflect on the role and potentialities of Blackness in assuring the survival of the Black body-mind. In other words, I ask: What does “the politics of everyday Blackness” reveal about practices and strategies of survival? Third, I propose to theorize “the politics of everyday Blackness” as a “postcolonial interruption” (Chambers 2017) which directly calls into question the race-blinded and universalist paradigm of humanitarianism, which informs many critical humanitarian studies. Race has indeed rarely been deployed as an analytical lens to scrutinize the liberal and humanist foundations of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012).⁴⁰ I thus attempt to theorize “the politics of everyday Blackness” as a practical laceration, an *interruption*, within the supposed harmonious universal scope of the modern human(itarian). I ask: what does “the politics of everyday Blackness” say about the universal and humanist foundations of humanitarian government?

2.2 ASYLUM AND THE PREDICAMENT OF BLACKNESS

One’s “racial identity” is not simply determined, for example, by the “fact” of one’s skin color. [...] So, in the case of skin color, racialization involves a process of investing skin color with meaning, such that “black” and “white” come to function, not as descriptions of skin color, but as racial identities. The term “racialized bodies” has another implication, of course. It suggests that that *we cannot understand the production of race without reference to embodiment*. [...] Although I will argue that the racial body is discursively constructed, I will also suggest that “essence” does not disappear. Rather, *“essence” is an effect of construction*. So, although we might say there is no such thing as race as the intrinsic property of bodies, this does not mean that race does not exist, as an effect of the very way in which we think, know and inhabit the world. In some sense, what we need to examine is the production of “essence” itself, by asking the question: *how is it that bodies come to be lived as having essential characteristics?*

— Sara Ahmed (2002:47, emphasis my own).

⁴⁰ With the intention to fill the gap between critical humanitarian studies and critical race studies, recent works have reflected on the constitutive relationship between race and humanitarianism. See: Mellino (2019), Pallister-Wilkins (2020; 2021) and Sing (2018).

With the aim to unveil the racial constitution of what has been termed by (mainstream) media and policy makers as the 2015 “refugee crisis”, Nicholas De Genova (2017) provocatively wonders if “black lives matter in Europe.”⁴¹ As anticipated in the previous chapter, the contemporary management of specific migrant populations is profoundly shaped by colonial legacies and unequal power relationships between Europe and its former colonies (Shelley 2018). From this perspective, De Genova denounces the race-blindness of the “migrant” category, which contributes to the obfuscation of the racial dimension of the “crisis” (De Genova 2017:5). Other scholars have also suggested that seemingly race-blinded categories, like the “asylum seeker”/“refugee”, covertly embody the socio-cultural and symbolic vehicles through which racial hierarchies are re-established between Europe and its (postcolonial) Others (Balibar 2004; Picozza 2021). Within mainstream and liberal accounts of the “refugee crisis”, race and racial imaginary continue to operate in the forms of “taboos” (Maneri 2021), namely as the scandalous truth which needs to be constantly denied and mystified.

In this regards, Fiorenza Picozza (2021) developed the notion of the “coloniality of asylum” to emphasize:

the racializing border-work of the “refugee” category, which naturalizes some people on the move as objects of European management, charity or, at best, political engagement. This fundamental objectification at the heart of the coloniality of asylum is predicated upon the purported incompatibility of “Europeanness” and “refugeeness” as conditions that, spatially, temporally and socially, are utterly Other. Because “Europeanness” is ultimately constructed as a postcolonial racial formation of whiteness (De Genova 2016) and “refugeeness” as a post-colonial formation of non-whiteness, this irreducibility situates the “refugee” as an increasingly racial category that rearticulates processes of racial formation through the intertwining of victimhood, nationality, legal status, culture, religion and phenotypical attributes (Picozza 2021:6).

⁴¹ For a critical exploration on the evolution of the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the US, see: Taylor (2016).

The crisis's racial dimension becomes evident when examining the "color line" (Du Bois 2007; Quisumbing King 2022) structuring "solidarity spectacles" at the Eu external borders (Cutitta 2012; De Genova 2013), where evolving formations of Blackness-vis-à-vis-Whiteness⁴² often account for the partition between migrants and humanitarian personnel (Pallister-Wilkins 2022a).

Reflecting on these evolving racial formations constituting the "crisis", De Genova (2017) warns the reader against a stable and taken-for-granted conception of Blackness, which indeed should not be considered in terms of

any supposedly "objective" or "natural" sort of (phenotypic, quasi-"biological") racial Blackness that might be more predictably attributed to people of African origin or descent in particular, but rather to the pronouncedly heterogeneous spectrum of all those categories of humanity that European imperialism unrelentingly produced as its colonized "natives." Hence, for present purposes, I am positing a more *expansive*, if provisional, *understanding of Blackness as a racialized sociopolitical category that can be understood to encompass the full spectrum of social identities produced as specifically "non-White."* In this respect, migration and refugee movements may be recognized as providing crucial sites for what Achille Mbembe has tellingly depicted as "the Becoming Black of the world", in which "the term "Black" has been generalized" (2017:6) and there is a "tendency to universalize the Black condition" (De Genova 2017:7, emphasis my own).

In line with Picozza (2021), the author theorizes an "expansive understanding of Blackness," conceived as a sociopolitical spectrum that encompasses those social identities relentlessly reproduced as "non-White" by European discourses. Accordingly, this "expansive understanding" implies multiple, and possibly conflicting, social identities which are variously

⁴² I use the expression "Blackness-vis-à-vis-Whiteness" as a way to stress the relational functioning of race. As suggested by various studies on the topic, social formations of Blackness and Whiteness always imply, an explicit or implicit, reference to their counterpart (Fanon 1986; Hawtorne 2022; Morning, Maneri 2022; Wehelyie 2014).

and hierarchically positioned on the “malleable” (Christian 2018) and stratified spectrum of Blackness and Whiteness.

Evolving and site-specific social formations of Blackness and Whiteness began to emerge in light of the colonial encounter, which was at the origin of a global system of sociopolitical classification in which an array of interlacing attributes (skin color, religion, languages, gender, etc.) were essentialized and deployed to hierarchically divide the world population for economic and political purposes (Ahmed 2002; Fanon 1986; Hunter 2005; Pierre 2013; Quijano 2000; Weheliye 2014).⁴³ This hierarchical partition of the world population is a reminder of the foundational role race has been playing in organizing and structuring social formations over the last five centuries. As noted by Alexander G. Weheliye (2014) in his seminal work, *Habeas Viscus*, race and racial identities refer to polymorphic “assemblages” which enable the perpetual re-creation of human hierarchies according to essentialized differences:

I construe race, racialization, and racial identities as ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west (2014:3).

Within these racializing operations, Blackness and Whiteness began to imply and signify a differentiated access to material and symbolic resources, as well as became essential matrixes for the making of modern identity.

Racial formations of Blackness and Whiteness, however, are not immutable and might evolve across time and space as well as along with geopolitical shifts. For instance, in her article *On the Frontier of Whiteness? Expropriation, War, and Social Reproduction in Ukraine*, Olena Lyubchenko

⁴³ see Chapter 3 on the relationship between race, capital, and labor.

(2022) elaborated on the modalities through which “Ukrainianness” decisively moved toward the “frontier of Whiteness” in the wake of the Russian invasion of the country in February 2022. The partial and subordinate incorporation of Ukrainianness into the realm of “European postcolonial Whiteness” (De Genova 2016) could be analyzed in relation to the differential management of Ukrainian refugees, who received treatment by European institutions and society more generally in a way that was less restrictive, and arguably more racially-based, when compared with other populations (Balogun 2023; Esposito 2022).

In a similar vein, Heather Merrill (2013; see also Guglielmo and Salerno 2003) retraced the genealogy of “Italianness” and its substantial historical evolution, from a subordinate and marginal position to its incorporation into the realm of Whiteness in recent decades. From this perspective, Fiorenza Picozza (2024) reflected on how the process of European integration has contributed to weaken infra-European cultural and racial differences, giving rise to the continental social formation of Whiteness counterposed to non-White postcolonial others.

In his article, De Genova (2017) mentions Stuart Hall’s (2009) worlds, who once affirmed that:

I’d never called myself Black ever in my life...So it was a discovery for me, a rediscovery [in Britain] of the Caribbean in new terms...and a rediscovery of the Black subject...I didn’t choose that. I had no alternative (in De Genova 2017:7).

Hall’s point directly reminds one of Frantz Fanon’s discovery of his own Blackness through the voyage from Martinique to Paris. It is in France that Fanon (1986) realized the significance of being Black, as well as the consciousness’ lacerations afflicting the Black body.

However, far from emerging exclusively within the (post)colonial diaspora, social formations of Blackness and Whiteness are scattered worldwide. In the *Predicament of Blackness. Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*, Jemima Pierre (2013) ethnographically explores the centrality of Blackness in crafting contemporary Ghanaian socio-cultural identity. Her study is of pivotal

importance, as it allows for the unveiling of the presence of social formations of Blackness beyond the diasporic horizon:

Contemporary African societies, in other words, are so thoroughly structured by processes of racialization that they deserve to be treated as historically coeval (Fabian 1983) with Black communities in the diaspora rather than either as historically, politically, and culturally distinct or as representative of a past cultural survival into the present (Pierre 2013:1).

Pierre's study demonstrated that social identities are not reformulated and re-signified in terms of Blackness and Whiteness only once they are subjected to a postcolonial diasporic journey. In light of the colonial experience and its global reach, indeed, Blackness and Whiteness has profoundly and transversally influenced modern social identity: its making, transformation, and negotiation.

As far as anthropology is concerned, it is necessary to explore how social groups and individuals negotiate and internalize their own (inter)subjective embodiment in relation to these evolving socio-racial formations (Ahmed 2002; Hook 2008). In other words, one is required to scrutinize the emic perspectives of those asylum seekers who are included within the "expanded understanding of Blackness" (De Genova 2017). As I have explored in the previous section, for instance, the "politics of everyday Blackness" emerged exclusively among asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan countries. At the same time, asylum seeker from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, or Bangladesh, who I met during the fieldwork, never talked about themselves in term of "Black people."

Social groups and individuals considered as "non-White" from an European positioning, in fact, do not necessarily experience and negotiate being Black the same way. As we have seen in the ethnographic vignettes above, for instance, migrants from Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia overtly reproduced an anti-Black politics against Sub-Saharan asylum seekers. This is echoed

by a series of recent studies on the topic, which demonstrated that while Northern African subjectivities being racially subordinated to “European postcolonial Whiteness” (De Genova 2016), they often enact an anti-Black politics against Sub-Saharan people (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020; Pomeps 2021).

Therefore, one has to acknowledge possible discrepancies which might arise between an etic and “expanded understanding of Blackness” (De Genova 2017) and an emic and (inter)subjective embodiment of Blackness (Ahmed 2002; Hook 2008). The “politics of everyday Blackness” might help us to stress this discrepancy. Most notably, exploring and theorizing the “politics of everyday Blackness” is a way to make visible evolving constellations of what Stuart Hall proposed to call “Black ethnicities,” which risk remaining invisible if one considers race as a mere discourse external to the self:

If the Black subject and Black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is “ethnicity.” The term “ethnicity” acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual (Hall 2021:252).

“Black ethnicities” are neither fixed nor immutable, and they “always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, gender and ethnicity” (Hall 2021:250). That said, they might favor the development of forms of belonging which need to be acknowledged and recognized as an essential experience in the life of specific social groups. As I will argue in the pages below, these evolving constellations of “black ethnicities” play an important role in assuring the survival of Black asylum seekers in contemporary Europe, a social space haunted by the specter of (anti)Blackness (Hine et al. 2009; Fra 2023; Merrill 2018; Pitts 2019).

2.3 BLACKNESS AS COUNTER-INFRASTRUCTURE OF SURVIVAL

Under slavery, as under any other social system, those at the bottom were not totally dominated by the master class. They found ways of subverting the worst of the system and even at times of dominating the masters. The slaves created a unified Black community in which class differences within the community, while not totally eradicated, were much less significant than the ties of Blackness in a White man's world; all Blacks potentially could bring into that community needed information, as well as provide extra food and protection for runaway slaves.

— George P. Rawick (1972:95).

What is nothingness? What is thingliness? What is blackness? What's the relationship between blackness, thingliness, nothingness, and the (de/re)generative operations of what Deleuze might call *a life* in common?

— Fred Moten (2018:197).

Having unveiled the “politics of everyday Blackness” in the pages above, this section aims to reflect on the function of this politics in relation to strategies of resistance and survival. In recent years, a growing body of literature on the “autonomy of migration”⁴⁴ has attempted to unveil the modalities through which migrants reorganize their own lives in light of asylum's coercive and exclusionary nature. This literature has mainly focused on the material networks which sustain the making of the migrant body, such as the foundational role played by grassroots European collectives in providing a series of resources (accommodation, information, food) to people on the move (Anderlini, Filippi, Giliberti 2022). Acknowledging the importance of this material level, I also investigate the relevance of Blackness in assuring forms of affectivity and belonging which have been partly overlooked by the literature on the “autonomy of migration.”

Underground Europe is a book written by Luca Queirolo Palmas and Federico Rahola (2020) that attempts to make an (im)possible comparison. The title wittingly evokes *the Underground Railroad*, the informal counter-infrastructure of escape operating during the US slavery regime. At that time, a protean alliance, composed by the Black community and abolitionists, churchman, and advocates was developing with the aim of aiding the escape of Black fugitive slaves through secret escape routes (Foner 2015; Whitehead 2016). Fugitive slaves were

⁴⁴ Other than the works quoted in the pages below, for a critical overview on the “autonomy of migration” approach, see: Bojadžijev and Karakayali (2010), Mezzadra (2001, 2011b), Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos (2008).

supported by a network of various actors in their attempts to be free from the chains of racial slavery.

Despite historical, geographical, and political differences, Queirolo Palmas and Rahola utilize the Underground Railroad's lens in order to make visible the systemic diffusion in contemporary Europe of acts of migrant (r)esistance against and within the destructive working of the "postcolonial asylum infrastructure" (Novak 2021a; see chapter 1). In line with "the autonomy of migration" approach, *Underground Europe* does not romanticize and idealize migrant resistance. In acknowledging the (racial) brutality of the system, however, it invites the reader to not lose sight of the panoply of subjective actions which constantly contest power relationships by opening up provisional spaces of sociopolitical autonomy. Ethnographic studies, in this regard, have the power to shed light on the ordinary forces of disruption, subtraction and refusal which accompany the act of migration, and indeed the very lives of migrants themselves (Agier 2019; Belloni, Fravega, Giudici 2020; Fontanari 2019; Fravega 2023). In addition, *Underground Europe* aims to map the politics of solidarity which supports and sustains migrant resistance in Europe, a system of practices through which activists, grassroots collectives, and informal networks organize to support migrants. Overall, the book captures the presence of what we might call "counter-infrastructures of survival": namely heterogenous, multiple, and evolving networks of actors, technology and knowledge that sustain, in provisional and unstable ways, the survival of migrant people who are confronted with the "postcolonial asylum infrastructure."

In a similar vein, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis S. Tsianos (2013) advanced the notion of "mobile commons" to describe an organizational ontology that pertains to the migratory experience in its attempt to disrupt racial governance. With this notion, the authors refer to multiple things at once. This includes the (re)creation and diffusion of a "mobile knowledge": namely, the circulation of information about routes, shelters, resting places, access to health and

resources more broadly, and constant updates about the reliability of this knowledge through an “infrastructure of connectivity,” made possible by old and new communication technologies. The “mobile commons,” the authors emphasize, is a “politics of migration” which is “*non-political*” (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013:188). People on the move, therefore, do not embody an organized, unitary, and representable entity destined to become the “new working class” (for instance) or a revolutionary subject. Rather, the concept of the “mobile commons” implies a panoply of everyday acts and forms of life which cannot be assimilated within the liberal democratic order, and are thus destined to remain (in)visible yet latent, fragile agglomerates of practices and alliances which assure the reproduction of oppressed subjectivities and, at the same time, show the racial underpinnings of liberal integrationist politics.

This analytical frame is akin to what James C. Scott calls “infrapolitics,” an analytical lens that describes “a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott 1990: 20). These “forms of resistance” are somehow invisible, as they conceal within everyday practices which do not aim to subvert the social order and do not occur through institutional-alike organizational structures. In various cases, guided by a pragmatist attitude, the oppressed do not directly challenge the constituted order, as they are well-aware of the imbalances of power that crisscross the social fields which they inhabit (Scott 1990:183). As such, infrapolitics refers to a range of informal acts, discourses, and attitudes that serve as both material and symbolic infrastructures, capable of fostering partial progress and reinforcing grassroots support. The infrapolitical perspective encourages one to transcend conventional notions of politics and struggle, such as liberal structures like parties, unions, and recognition. Instead, it reveals a hidden systemic instability that pervades society and goes unnoticed when viewed through a purely liberal lens (Kelley 1996). Most notably, infrapolitics includes a series of attitudes and calculations which reveal a deep consciousness and pragmatism of oppressed groups. When Musa, for instance, affirmed that “Blacks don’t have the power,” he demonstrated

a profound consciousness about the dynamics of power at play in a specific social context. However, this does not mean that he passively suffered these dynamics. Rather, it means that he and the other Black people need to constantly negotiate and re-calibrate their aspirations and actions considering these structures of power.

Scott's theory emerged from an ethnographic project carried out in a Malay Village—in fact a quite homogenous societal context, both culturally and ethnically speaking. As such, we might advance that social ties among the oppressed possessed some stability and historicity, with consistent forms of belonging and kinship—both familiar and ethno-cultural. In contrast, the contemporary scenario of asylum in Europe characterized by extreme heterogeneity, both cultural and ethnic, as the category of the “asylum seeker” conceals an immeasurable array of human diversity. This heterogeneity also differs from the context of the Underground Railroad, where social oppression was organized and reproduced on the basis of anti-Black racism and where, at the same time, slaves' infrapolitical horizon possessed a dimension of embodied Blackness (Kelley 1994; Rawick 1972). In this regard, Cedric Robinson refers to the “Black radical tradition” to describe an array of counter-hegemonic forms of life and belonging developed within and against the “war on the Black body” inaugurated by the Atlantic Slave Trade (Harney, Moten 2013; Kelley 2000). He notes that:

Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension. [...] The transport of African labor [to the mines and plantations of the Caribbean and subsequently to what would be known as the Americas meant also the transfer of African ontological and cosmological systems; African presumptions of the organization and significance of social structure; African codes embodying historical

consciousness and social experience; and African ideological and behavioral constructions for the resolution of the inevitable conflict between the actual and the normative (Robinson 2000:157-158).

The point raised by Robinson is of pivotal importance. The author invites one to consider the survival of Black enslaved people in the wake of the Atlantic Slave Trade not exclusively in terms of material and physical sustainment. For Robinson, the existence and reproduction of the Black (collective) body is primarily a matter of intellectual, mental, and psychic survival. The heterogenous mixture of “language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality” which enslaved people brought with them represented the foundations from which emerged evolving forms of Black consciousness, comprehension, organization, and belonging. Blackness, from this perspective, is not only the name of a denied and degraded form of humanity. On the contrary, the Black of the “Black Radical Tradition” is the name of an array of forms of life in common (i.e. consciousness, knowledge, belonging, sociality) which arose at the intersection of already existing forms of life—values, traditions, cosmologies, metaphysics, ontologies—combined within an emerging and evolving anti-Black social order.

Robinson attempts to map the presence, throughout the whole American continent, of maroons’ communities, namely autonomous sociopolitical spaces of fugitive Black slaves. These communities, albeit provisional and unstable, express the profound and innate human exigence to perpetually (re)create spaces of community and forms of belonging which are essential to sustaining the making of human life. The Black Radical Tradition, therefore, accounts for the infinite attempts to (re)make, (re)create and (re)image a (Black) communitarian horizon, as well as form of (Black) ethno-cultural belonging, essential to assure the survival of the *Black body-mind* within a social landscape characterized by a political imperative of Black destruction.

Robinson’s anthropological perspective, so to speak, enables one to complexify the literature on the autonomy of migration. This scholarship attempted to make visible the presence of

“counter-infrastructures of survival” which assure the reproduction of the migrant (collective) body in a context of racial brutality. These have been theorized in relation to the material interactions between migrant and non-migrant actors, for instance, as well as the provisioning of goods and exchange of information and knowledge. What is also necessary to explore, however, is how forms of consciousness, belonging and sociality are negotiated and rearticulated in the wake of two interwoven elements: the above-mentioned ethno-cultural heterogeneity included within the category of the “asylum seeker”, as well as the coercive and entropic nature of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure.”

As we have seen in Chapter 1, within the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure,” asylum seekers are arbitrarily and repeatedly managed and moved by others. Among other repercussions, this dynamic may lead to extreme social fragmentation and entropy. For instance, a group of people might be divided during the journey towards Europe, as well as a person with some acquaintances in Europe is not sure whether or when might be able to reach them since they might be moved to a reception facility located into another country or region. These are just some examples of how the functioning of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” might bring about a total fragmentation and partial destruction of social ties. What is necessary to investigate, therefore, is how forms of kinship and belonging can be (re)assembled in an evolving situation characterized by immeasurable (and sometimes conflicting) heterogeneity, on the one hand, and destructive organized socio-spatial entropy, on the other.

From this perspective, I contend that “the politics of everyday Blackness” expresses and refers also to a specific dimension of “counter-infrastructures of survival.” It reveals the role of Blackness in favoring evolving and unstable forms of belonging, consciousness and sociality which are foundational in assuring the reproduction of human life as a “*life in common*” (Moten 2018). While in Bologna, for instance, I usually met with Hawa, Musa and other Black asylum seekers in the same café in the city center. That place was mainly attended by Black people, and

I often felt observed as I was the unique White person around. Hawa went there almost every day before his night shifts at Interporto. There, he met with acquaintances and friends for socializing and having some small talks before working. Other than being an informal “Black hub” where Hawa exchanged information concerning various topics (documents, housing, job), that café was in its simplicity a space where an evolving and malleable Black community met to socialize and being together. It embodied a social platform favoring the development of forms of affectivity, belonging and sociality with a Black imprinting. It is not by chance that the “politics of everyday Blackness” was always spoken out in collective terms. Other than describing a situation of generalized social oppression afflicting Black people, this politics also implies a “submarine black sociality” (Moten 2018), a sense and necessity of belonging, which are foundational to assure the making of the *Black body-mind* in a social landscape marked by an anti-Black politics (Sexton 2008; Vargas 2018). Survival certainly requires the provision of material goods; but it also requires a social politics of affectivity, consciousness and belonging intrinsic to the human as such.

2.4 BRINGING RACE BACK IN: THE HUMAN(ITARIAN) IN QUESTION

...in today’s humanitarianist [...] frames, Blackness, more often than not, continues to function as the symbol, the metaphor, and the trope [...] of victimhood and harmless pity—similarly to the colonial “savage” in European political thought.

— Ida Danewid (et al. 2021:12).

...it was Europe’s duty to help and protect [the Black Man]. This made the colonial enterprise a fundamentally “civilizing” and “humanitarian” enterprise. The violence that was its corollary could only ever be moral.

— Achille Mbembe (2017:12).

Over the last decades, countless publications in disciplines such as anthropology, political geography, and history have focused on humanitarianism as a specific facet of the “sovereign machine of governmentality” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:175-176). Given the renewed

employment of humanitarian interventions on the international stage, humanitarianism has become a recurrent object of inquiry and investigation. Offering an exhaustive account of this debate is far beyond the scope of this section, which instead aims to bring to light a blind spot informing some of the most influential works on the topic: the racial functioning of modern sovereignty, and the racial partitioning of the modern human.

Far from being a mere philological exercise, assuming race as a key analytical prism (Hall 1978; 2021) can help to uncover a different way of understanding the operational logic of humanitarianism. As recently suggested by Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2021; 2022a, b), humanitarianism is a technology of government through which a White supremacist order is maintained and reproduced on a global scale. In exploring the racial-colonial foundations of humanitarianism, therefore, we aim to uncover the modalities through which these same foundations are rearticulated, unevenly and site-specifically, in the postcolonial present.

In her contribution on the “the disappearance of race” in border and migration studies, Leila Whitley (2017) offers a detailed account on the elision of race in those works, and focuses on the sovereign dynamics of illegalization, confinement, and dehumanization afflicting people on the move. Race, she argues, is usually conceived of as a “pre-theoretical” and “pre-political” concept that does not deserve full and in-depth investigation. According to Whitley, “the disappearance of race” is partly related to the influential oeuvre of Giorgio Agamben, with key-concepts such as “bare life” and “the camp” often employed to describe socio-legal and political processes of drawing borders.

By drawing on postcolonial critique of modern sovereignty (Mbembe 2003; see also Mellino 2019, Nisancioglu 2020), Whitley attempts to recalibrate Agamben’s famous assertion about the fact that every subject is a potential “bare life” in the hand of sovereign power. According to Agamben, indeed, sovereign power operates indiscriminately and its brutal operations (both socio-legal and political) can indistinctly affect and target the social body. This theoretical

framework, however, does not take into account the foundational role played by race in unevenly and differentially distributing the effects of power on particular people:

Agamben does not address, nor seem to acknowledge, that some are more vulnerable to the mechanizations of state power than others. [...] To read migration without a theory of differential exposure and vulnerability to power is to obscure how racism, coloniality and sexism structure the systems that produce some as illegal migrants, while facilitating the mobility of others, and leave some exposed to violence and at risk of death, while others pass safely between national systems (Whitley 2017:14-15).

This theoretical recalibration pertains also to critical humanitarian studies, particularly with a focus on migration. The lexicon of “bare life” and “the camp” is indeed regularly deployed to describe the experiences of illegalized migrants and asylum seekers who are subjected to (para)institutional and prolonged situations of socio-spatial confinement and segregation. While skeptical of Agamben’s perspective, critical humanitarian studies on migration usually tend to outline and insist on infrapolitical, yet systemic, forms of migrants’ agency (Rahola, Queirolo and Palmas 2020). Agamben’s paradigm, it is argued, does not consider the modalities through which “bare lives” resist the totalizing tendency of sovereignty. The question these studies, both critical to or in line with Agamben’s arguments, often fail to ask is why certain bodies and populations are more likely to become “bare lives” in the hand of the (humanitarian) sovereign machine, while others are less likely to encounter zones of legal indistinction and structural violence. In other words, critical humanitarian studies on migration rarely investigate “how power is meted out”, nor do they “answer the question of who is detained in camps, nor why”; instead:

while the theory describes the violence made possible by a particular legal experience, it does not address the distribution of this violence. Again, race and racism do not come up (Whitley 2017: 7).

To further explore the question of “who,” it is necessary to reflect on the foundational role played by race and colonialism in shaping the operational logic of sovereignty. As elucidated by Achille Mbembe (2003, 2017), race is the “assemblage” (Wehelyie 2014) that gave rise to the two-faced nature of sovereignty: the biopolitical and the necropolitical. In other words, the biopolitical (re)production and sustainability of certain populations is unthinkable without the perpetual (re)creation of other populations in terms of bare, disposable, and killable bodies (Mbembe 2003; see also McIntre, Nast 2011). The “colony” was the political laboratory at the base of the ambivalent logic of sovereignty and of governmentality. This founding ambivalence is often articulated through the working of the “color line” (Du Bois 2007; Quisumbing King 2022).

Drawing from Michel Foucault’s (2003) assertion that racism serves as a “caesura” that enables the systematic denial of certain groups being defined as human, Nikhil Pal Singh contends that:

The racialization of the world in this sense needs to be understood as one of the supreme, constituent acts of modern power. It has helped to create and re-create “caesuras” in human populations at both national and global scales that have been crucial to the political management of populations by nation-states ever since. To understand this, we need to recognize the technology of race as something more than skin color or biophysical essence, but precisely as those historic repertoires and cultural, spatial, and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purposes of another’s health, development, safety, profit, and pleasure (Singh 2005: 223; quoted in Nemser 2017).

The racial-colonial shadow shapes contemporary governmental operations, which imply as well as reproduce hierarchies of lives and unevenly distributed access to material and symbolic resources. Overall, race, as a postcolonial assemblage, accounts for why certain bodies are “more killable, torturable, deportable, exploitable, *victimizable* and *refugeeizable* than others” (Mellino 2019: 138; my translation, emphasis mine). As far as this work is concerned, bringing race back

into the analysis of the humanitarian government of migration allows for an understanding of why certain bodies are produced and naturalized in terms of victimhood and “refugee-ness”, while others escape this ambiguous socio-legal and political destiny.

From this perspective, Polly Pallister-Wilkins’ book *Humanitarian Borders* (2022a) aims to conceptualize the humanitarian domain in racial terms. Reflecting on her ethnographic experience in the Mediterranean Sea, the author outlines that the humanitarian horizon pertains exclusively to negatively racialized populations who move to Europe from the Middle East and the African continent. This horizon materializes through a logic of governance of migration which simultaneously conceives certain subjects in terms of victimhood *and* perishability. By contrast, European citizens are immune to this logic, and can travel comfortably by cruises and planes across the Mediterranean. Put simply, one might argue that humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012) is activated and becomes operational in a selective manner, embracing some bodies while remaining inaccessible for others.

These theoretical considerations are revelatory if one considers that humanitarianism embodies a form of moral government based on the assumption that all humans equally belong to a universal human community (Fassin 2012). But, who is the “human” of humanitarianism?⁴⁵ Or, recalling Walter Mignolo (2009), who speaks for the human of humanitarianism?

In their book *In the Name of Humanity*, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (2010) present an exhaustive account on the various contexts in which the idea of humanity is mobilized to justify political actions. Despite the fact that debates on human nature and its contested borders are long-standing, the encounter between humanity and government materialized within the political horizon of modernity:

⁴⁵ Costas Douzinas (2007), for instances, asks the same question but does not take into account the racial-colonial implications of humanitarian reason.

Humanity has a long history as a foundational principle for politics and ethics. The question of whether certain sorts of people—slaves, Native Americans—should be considered human and therefore deserving of particular rights and protections was long debated (Aristotle 1998; Sepúlveda 1892; Casas 1972). Humanity, that is, marked a dividing line between those to whom politics and ethics pertained and those to whom they did not. What distinguishes this older history of humanity from its modern incarnation is precisely the notion of universality. While these earlier modes of distinction have not entirely disappeared—in fact they periodically reappear in discussions about how to deal with “terrorists,” “insurgents,” and other modern “savages”—the discourse of humanity since the Enlightenment proceeds from the assumption that this category has universal valence. The French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen is one of the most frequently cited examples of this new belief (Feldman and Ticktin 2010:6,7).

In line with other studies on the topic (Agier 2011; Barnett 2011; Fassin 2012), Feldman and Ticktin contend that in order to understand the specificity of humanitarianism as a form of government, one needs to analyze the context within which humanity emerged as a universal category: that is, it is through its universalization that the idea of humanity started to function as a driving principle of politics.

The modern process by which “human” was made universal, Feldman and Ticktin note, was characterized by a series of antinomies and contradictions. Since the French Revolution of 1789, for instance, the idea of the universal man has been subordinated to the sphere of national citizenship, for only those belonging to a sovereign state had been fully recognized as rights bearers (Arendt 1973; Balibar 2004). Moreover, the authors emphasize the racial and gendered fault-lines which sustained the process of human universalization. The authors mentioned the position of the anti-colonial intellectual Frantz Fanon, who denounced “the category of humanity as exclusionary and racist” (2010: 10), or that of Louis Althusser, who stressed how the creation of a universal liberal humanity was integral to European imperialism and was condemned to “result in the monopoly of the category by a few, and the denial of the humanity of others who do not conform” (Feldman and Ticktin 2010:10). From this perspective, Silvyia

Wynter (2003), among others, unveiled the racial violence concealed within the supposedly neutral category of the human. In her view, the modern figure of the human, which had emerged during the centennial path of colonial-modernity, in fact implies specific geo-political and cultural connotations and features at the service of specific epistemic, political, and economic interests—*the coloniality of being*.

Despite acknowledging the racial foundations of the modern human, Feldman and Ticktin seem to relegate this issue to a marginal position within the whole economy of the book. In line with other critical humanitarian studies, the relationship between race, the colonial encounter and processes of human(itarian) universalization is either completely overlooked (see Agier 2011 or Fassin 2012) or considered as an important element which is at the end of the day irrelevant to grasp the operational logic of humanitarianism (see, for instance, Barnett 2011).

As outlined by a series of studies, race alone simply does not account for the multiple borders and hierarchies that crisscross the modern human. In other words, the construct of race does not only signal when and how individuals are deemed “not” or “less than” human. Rather, race operates as a *generative assemblage* that allows the concept of a universalized “humanity” by dehumanizing the colonial and Indigenous other. In her work on the intimacies between European liberalism, racism and colonialism, Lisa Lowe (2015) discusses “the economy of affirmation and forgetting” in order to outline the operative modalities of liberal politics. This epistemic economy operates systemic forms of disconnection and separation in relation to historical and political processes which are in fact strictly dependent on one another. The past and present *affirmation* of a supposed universal and shared human condition is played upon a systemic *forgetting* of the racial conditions of possibilities which are indispensable to such human affirmation:

Race as a mark of colonial difference is an enduring remainder of the processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the peoples who created

the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten. [...] racial differences and distinctions designate the boundaries of the human and endure as remainders attesting to the violence of liberal universality (Lowe 2015: 3, 7).

Critical humanitarian studies, albeit to different and varying extents, seem complicit with this liberal “economy of affirmation and forgetting” (Lowe 2015). Lowe’s theoretical insight suggests that the universal horizon of humanitarianism does not only possess a hierarchical racial structure; rather, it also aims to show that whenever this horizon is mobilized, it silently re-establishes a liberal order in which the White subject can exist only by relegating negatively racialized others to an inferior human position: namely, for instance, the one in the position of the victim. From this perspective, Tiffany Lethabo King, in her work on epistemic encounters between Black and Native studies, advanced the notion of “conquistador humanism” to describe the operational logic of the modern universal human:

For the human to continue to evolve as an unfettered form of self-actualizing (and expanding) form of Whiteness, Black and Indigenous people must die or be transformed into lesser forms of humanity—and, in some cases, become nonhuman altogether. [...] White humanity and its self-actualization require Black and Native death as its condition of possibility (King 2019: 16, 20-21).

These analytical reflections on the generative intimacy between the human and race are clearly connected to a historical dimension. In their historical investigation of the British colonial empire, Alain Lester and Fae Dussart contend that “humanitarian reason is grounded in the invasion and the regulation of colonization” (Lester and Dussart 2014: 6; see also Skinner and Lester 2012). Humanitarianism’s founding moments usually do not include the government of European colonies. Rather, the battle of Solferino (1859), the subsequent creation of the International Red Cross, and the abolitionist movements against the Atlantic slave trade are

often regarded as decisive moments from which governmental techniques aimed at preserving human lives have subsequently emerged (Barnett 2011).

Despite recognizing the importance of these events, Lester and Dussart demonstrated that colonized populations were the first subjects on which humanitarian techniques of government were tested, elaborated, and implemented: a “governmental responsibility to protect seems to have emerged at the same time and in the same space as that government assumed the right to colonize” (Lester, Dussart 2014:1). The humanitarian nexus between protection and colonization should not be seen as sort of paradox. Rather, it represents a foundational feature which can be grasped if one considers above-mentioned reflections on the intimacy between race, sovereignty, and the human. The two historians contend, from this perspective, that humanitarian forms of government could only emerge with respect to those populations excluded from the human but who at the same time were essential to the *affirmation* of the modern universal-liberal human.

While numerous studies have explored the racially ambiguous nature of modern sovereignty and the racial dimensions of modern humanity as intertwined phenomena, critical humanitarian studies have seldom examined humanitarianism from a racial perspective. Notable examples include Didier Fassin’s *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (2012) and William Walters’ *Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border* (2011).

According to Fassin, humanitarian government is highly ambiguous and contradictory: while claiming the equality of all human beings in the name of a common and universal humanity, it also implies an ontological hierarchy of beings, in which the “victim other” is subordinated and dependent on the subjects responsible for their salvation and protection. As Fassin describes:

This tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government. In other words, the

subjectivity, claims, and voice of the “suffering other” are systematically silenced and denied in what emerges to be a relationship of “humane domination” (Fassin 2012:3).

The inextricable tension between inequality and solidarity, between acts of compassion and forms of domination, is one of the core antinomies of humanitarianism, and Fassin dedicates the last chapter of the book to the issue, emblematically titled *Hierarchies of Humanity*. By focusing on the 2003 Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) mission in Baghdad, at the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq, he reflects on the “differentiated meanings and values of human lives” (2012: 226) which are implied in any humanitarian intervention. The ontological hierarchies of life challenge the notion of a common humanity and address structural imbalances between “victims” and those responsible for their welfare, along with disparities in how humanitarian personnel are treated. Western, and often White, officials have a degree of political, economic and symbolic power, which is usually denied to “native” humanitarian workers, who are nonetheless fundamental to operations as they have a direct access to information in the field. This situation, Fassin contends, resembles the way in which “colonial administrators might have need of local chiefs—and anthropologists of informants” (2012: 239).

Although Fassin’s analysis focuses on the “hierarchies of humanity” which are implicated and reproduced in humanitarian settings, and most of his arguments are based on situations involving Western and former colonial powers (France, above all), either “abroad” (Iraq) or “at home” (in the case of asylum seekers coming from former European colonies), it systemically *forgets*, to paraphrase from Lowe (2015), to acknowledge the foundational roles that race has played in the simultaneous universalizing and hierarchical partitioning of the modern human.

The same sentiment is echoed in William Walters’ article, *Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border* (2011). In this seminal contribution, among the most quoted in critical humanitarian studies on migration, Walters reflects on the recent emergence of what he terms the “humanitarian border.” By focusing on the governmental transformations occurring

in the Mediterranean Sea, he contends that the humanitarian border manifests in areas of the world where border crossing is a matter of “life and death”, and where people are reduced to populations rendered exclusively in terms of victims. Similar to Fassin, Walters sees the humanitarian system as “a complex domain possessing specific forms of governmental reason,” in which takes shape “an uneasy alliance [between] a politics of alienation [and] a politics of care, and a tactic of abjection and one of reception” (2011:143-145).

What interested me here, however, is a descriptive detail of the article, namely the location of the humanitarian border. Walters indeed identifies the emergence of the humanitarian border at the contested intersection between the Global North and Global South. A paradigmatic example is the island of Lampedusa and the Mediterranean more broadly, which over the last two decades has become a node in the geopolitical and symbolic space which characterizes the “European crisis”:

The humanitarian government of migration is becoming common at what Freudenstein (2000) calls the world’s “frontiers of poverty.” These are the zones like the US-Mexico borderlands (Doty 2006), or the complex space formed by the Mediterranean, North Africa and the southern European states of the EU (Pugh 2004). These spaces can be likened to fault lines in the smooth space of globalization where it seems that the worlds designated by the terms Global North and Global South confront one another in a very concrete, abrasive way, and where gradients of wealth and poverty, citizenship and non-citizenship appear especially sharply (Walters 2011:145).

Here, the author seems to implicitly be paving the way for a (post)colonial understanding of the humanitarian border. Indeed, if we consider race as the foundational—material and epistemic—assemblage at the heart of the Global North-Global South divide (Anzaldúa 1987; see also Mignolo 2011), we can posit that the humanitarian border embodies a system of government in which the racial-colonial fracture of the human is reproduced, institutionalized, governed and valorized—politically and economically—rather than being contested and dismantled. To

paraphrase Gloria Anzaldúa's famous adage about the U.S.-Mexico borderland as an "open wound" where the "third world" bleeds into and enters the "first world" (Anzaldúa1987), we might affirm that the "humanitarian border" embodies a postcolonial wound which exposes the racial-colonial dimension of the modern human, and where racial-Otherness (re)emerges, is governed and put to work.

A close reading of Fassin and Walter's works on humanitarian government, as well as of other authors on the topic (see, for example, Agier 2011; Bauman 2004), reveals an absent present, a racial specter which haunts their writings without being explicitly and properly named and theoretically developed. They repeatedly insist on socio-ontological inequalities which crisscross the realm of the human, and refer to these human asymmetries in terms of Global North-Global South (Walters 2011) or "West and the rest" divide (Fassin 2012). However, the foundational racial-colonial quality that characterizes these asymmetries *disappears* (Whitley 2017) and is *forgotten* (Lowe 2015) in their analytical frameworks.

3. The humanitarian labor regime: a new spatio-racial politics of labor in contemporary Europe.

3.1 BECOMING SOUTH

In Bologna all is subterranean...at the public and institutional level, reception is presented as something virtuous, while in reality reception is a form of legalized exploitation that does not create scandal and it is good for everyone...for private companies, who have work for free, for social cooperatives, which without asylum seekers would have no ways to create and generate profit and value. Here we don't have slums and ghettos, like in other parts of Italy, and that's why you might think the situation is better...in reality things are much more complex and indeed very similar...they are part of the same socio-economic infrastructure, the difference is only aesthetic, visual.

— Marco, Interview with Author, Bologna 26.11.2021, my translation from the Italian.

This chapter conceptualizes the humanitarian labor regime as a distinct spatio-racial politics of labor emerged in Europe during the 2010s. What are the defining features of this politics of labor? As I have briefly anticipated in Chapter 1 (see 1.3), asylum implies a radical redefinition of those spaces assigned to the social reproduction of migrant labor. The reception archipelago, an infrastructure composed by thousands of reception facilities scattered across national territories, represents an essential facet concerning this redefinition in the making of migrant labor. As we will see in the next chapter, nowadays Europe is characterized by a systematic use of labor warehoused in reception facilities, irrespective of capital, industry, or territory. In this respect, the reception archipelago might be preliminary thought of as a sort of scattered labor dormitory which assures the making and capture of disposable and coerced labor to be exploited according to the need of different “low-skilled” industries in distinct territories.

Albeit this project mainly focuses on the reception archipelago, it also reflects on what happens when asylum seekers left reception facilities. As the story of Katou suggests (see Chapter 4.5), when people leave reception centers, they may end up wandering through a series of makeshift encampments in situations of extreme socio-economic precarity. As such, the humanitarian labor regime does not exclusively refer to the nexus between reception and the workplace; it also invites to not lose sight of the socio-economic and spatial repercussions of those who transited, or were forced to transit, through the “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021) and left, or were forced to leave, reception facilities. The working and spatiality of the humanitarian labor regime, therefore, also account for the panoply of make-shifts or (para)institutional landscapes of encampments, variously framed in the terms of “slums” or “ghettoes” (Campesi, Rigo, Dines 2016), which host ten of thousands of asylum seekers who, after leaving the space of reception, continue their journey at the margins of society (Dines, Rigo 2015; Peano 2021; Ippolito, Perrotta, Raeymaekers 2021). The space of reception and the protean constellation made of informal encampments are here considered as two sides of the humanitarian labor regime.

Overall, I consider the making of coerced and disposable labor, the proliferation of spatial arrangements alternative to housing (reception centers and encampments) and landscapes of labor informality, three interlinked aspects of the humanitarian labor regime, as structuring features of contemporary societies more broadly. In this regard, postcolonial and decolonial studies have provided fundamental insights on the socio-economic heterogeneity characterizing capitalist societies. Scholars such as Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018), Kalyan Sanyal (2007), Cedric Robinson (2000), Anibal Quijano (2000), Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013), Pamila Gupta (et al. 2024), among many others, contributed to reframing the historicist framework that had previously informed the orthodox Marxian doctrine. In particular, they demonstrated how capital advances and expands through the rearticulation of highly differentiated regimes of exploitation and social reproduction. Most notably, alleged outdated colonial-era patterns of

exploitation, characterized by region-specific blends of coercion, labor informality and “ghettoization”, remain integral to global accumulation processes: “the radical heterogeneity of labor relations that was long a characteristic of the colonial world increasingly invests the former metropolitan territories” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:92). From this perspective, regimes of coerced labor, which have proved to be foundational to capitalist expansion (Lebaron 2015), are not only rearticulated in the global present, but they also disturbingly anticipate broader socio-economic tendencies in areas of the world usually understood to be immune from such dynamics.

In *Theory from the South, or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*, Jean and John Comaroff (2012) provocatively ask:

What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? That it is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, is and ought to be coming, at least in significant part? (2012:1).

Through a comprehensive reconceptualization of modernity from the standpoint of Afromodernity, the authors contend that former colonized territories are not only actual in terms of socioeconomic, political, and spatial organizations, but also that these societies possess an array of features with significance for the world to come. Situations of labor coercion, economic informality, and agglomerations of (informal) encampments (Agier 2019; Davis, Isakjee 2018; Katz et al. 2019; Picker et al. 2015), are all but specters of the colonial order of things which haunt our future.

In line with the Comaroffs’ analytical perspective, Achille Mbembe (2017) has also discussed the “Becoming Black of the World.” With this concept, which recalls the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Mbembe aimed to trouble and reverse the hegemonic view

according to which racial equality and freedom have been finally and fully achieved in the horizon of neoliberal democracy. Joining other recent interventions on racial neoliberalism (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Goldberg 2009; see also Mullins 2020), Mbembe stressed that under neoliberal capitalism, an epoch in which capital has colonized more and more spheres of social life, the experience of black enslaved people disturbingly echoes the deplorable socio-economic conditions which affect an increasing portion of the world's population. Attentive to the need not to universalize and generalize a specific socio-existential condition, Mbembe insists on the necessity to analytically take into account how the "racial logic of capital" (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012) has become rearticulated, and possibly expanded, within the race-blinded horizon of neoliberal democracies. According to the author, landscapes of economic coercion and extreme redundancy, often associated with coercive regimes of exploitation (e.g. racial slavery), have subtly yet pervasively proliferated in areas of the world deemed immune from such dynamics.

Ngai Pun, Rutvica Andrijasevic and Devi Sacchetto (2020) take a similar position in their study on the global expansion of the Chinese-based "dormitory labor regime" (see also Ceccagno, Sacchetto 2020). While they argue that most scholarly attention has focused on North-to-South fluxes of capital investments and technologies, they argue that it is pivotal to analyze the modalities through which, for instance, Chinese capital's use of the dormitory to discipline the workforce is also reappearing in Europe. Therefore, Pun et al. (2019) propose a "transgressing[*of*] the North-South divide" to grasp how socio-spatial arrangements of capital accumulation could be imported from the Global South to the Global North. As I will argue below, for instance, the humanitarian labor regime partly resembles the Chinese-based dormitory labor regime, which represented a critical strategy beyond the emergence of China as the "global factory" (Pun 2016).

3.2 BRINGING EXPLOITATION BACK IN: THE ASYLUM SEEKER AS A FIGURE OF LABOR

From a certain point of view, the “bare life” paradigm has the same limits we identified in Fassin’s approach to humanitarianism. “Humanitarian reason,” on one hand, and “sovereign power,” on the other, detached from any attempt to understand presumptive material ends, become “machines” of capture, exclusion, and death (*and, not coincidentally, never of “exploitation”*) whose *raison d’être* we cannot never grasp, except in precisely “abstract” and “metaphysical” terms, or of simple “will to power,” as Nietzsche puts it.

— Mellino (2019:132, emphasis my own, my translation from the Italian).

As discussed in Chapter 2, bringing race back into the analysis of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012) allows for an account of how and why certain individuals are conceptualized and naturalized in terms of illegality, on the one hand, and victimhood and “refugee-ness,” on the other. In that chapter, I argued that the humanitarian border (Pallister-Wilkins 2022a; Walters 2011) is activated and becomes operative relative to populations which are racialized in specific ways. The humanitarian border, in other words, embodies a highly contentious governmental realm in which colonial hierarchies are implicated, as well as reproduced, in the name of often latent and “malleable” (Christian 2018) hierarchies of racial whiteness.

In this section and chapter, I focus on another interrelated erasure: namely, the lack of attention on processes of exploitation mediated and sustained by the European asylum regime. As I will discuss, in recent years, a series of studies have contributed to centering exploitation in the analysis of asylum and humanitarianism. What remains to be explored, however, is the modality through which the European asylum regime, as a distinct regime of “raced social reproduction” (Mezzadri 2022; Rigo 2022), gives rise to “figures of labor” (Mazzadra and Neilson 2013), which are in turn subjected to specific forms of disposability and coercion. I propose calling this particular regime of exploitation, which entail a spatio-racial reorganization in the making of labor, the humanitarian labor regime, building on the idea of a “raced social reproduction” (Mezzadri 2022) in order to explore how this dynamic ultimately impacts the labor market more broadly.

In *Border as Method*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) lament the surprising disappearance of exploitation—along with its mutating and heterogenous declinations—from critical and theoretical analyses on contemporary capitalism. The reasons behind this elision are complex and multifarious. Drawing on Stuart Hall (1992), the two authors identify in the “(sovereign) power vs. exploitation” binarism a sort of unproductive and sterile divide which had emerged from the literature on the topic. In order to revise this rigid partition, they entertained a close reading of Marx and proposed to analytically combine processes of “accumulation by dispossession” and those of “accumulation by exploitation” (Harvey 2003).

A similar tendency might also be said to be present in critical humanitarian studies. While attentive to sovereign dynamics of socio-spatial confinement and (bio)political disciplining, only recently have there been investigations of such dynamics in relation to changing patterns in the political economy. In this regard, Miguel Mellino has noted that the literature on asylum, often influenced by the “bare life” and “biopolitical” paradigm, has tended to conceive humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012) as an apparatus of “capture, exclusion and death,” which is above all external and unrelated to processes of exploitation (Mellino 2019:132). Paradigmatic of this tendency is the oft-quoted work of Zygmunt Bauman (2004), who contended that refugees embody “human waste” isolated from the political community and the economic sphere (see also Agier 2011; De Lauri 2015; Fassin 2012). In a similar vein, Kelly Oliver (2017) has discussed the concept of “carceral humanitarianism” to emphasize the disturbing intimacy between the logics of protection and detention in the management of refugees. Others have proposed concepts such as “humanitarian confinement” (Campesi 2015a), “social abandonment” (Pinelli 2018), and “slow death” (Lentin, Nedeljkovic 2021), among others, to make visible the disempowering, depletive and segregative nature of the European asylum regime. Others who have mainly focused on the external boundaries of the European asylum regime have explored the increasing intertwinement between humanitarianism, human rights, and security politics.

From this perspective, they argue, it is no longer clear whether the main aim of the European asylum regime is to protect migrant bodies from possible death or the European social body from threats embodied by migrants (Albahari 2015; Cutitta 2017; da Silva 2017; Garelli and Tazzioli 2017; Moreno-Lax 2018).

Although these studies have provided valuable analytical and theoretical insights, they have rarely investigated the structural interlacing between (bio)political and socio-spatial dynamics of exclusion and processes of exploitation. Needless to say, I do not claim to overturn this binarism, and instead focus exclusively on exploitation and the political economy more broadly. Moreover, I intend to explore the variegated and site-specific geographies which emerge at the intersection of these two axes. To what extent does the exclusionary and confining logic of asylum foster and shape the dynamics of the exploitation of asylum seekers? Conversely, to what extent does this regime of exploitation encourage and reinforce forms of dependency on the humanitarian apparatus?

In recent years, different studies have attempted to explore this topic by looking at the political economy of the asylum regime(s). Deanna Dadusc and Paolo Mudu (2020) have developed the concept of “the humanitarian industrial complex” to emphasize the multiple circuits of value essential to asylum. Jonathan Darling (2016a, b) and Paolo Novak (2019) insisted on the privatization, outsourcing and commodification of reception systems. Discussing the concept of “extractive humanitarianism,” Martina Tazzioli (2022) shed light on the employment of refugees as unpaid labor for testing technologies of data extraction (on the nexus between asylum and extraction, see also Morris 2023; Riva 2021). Given the multiple racialized circuits of value integral to the European asylum regime, Miguel Mellino (2019) posited that asylum needs to be framed in terms of a “moral political economy.” Originally deployed by James C. Scott (1977) and Edward P. Thompson (1991) to describe a series of anti-capitalist attitudes and communitarian pragmatics among marginalized and oppressed social groups, the notion of a “moral economy” was utilized by Didier Fassin to describe the functioning of humanitarian

reason. According to Fassin, asylum is a moral form of government based on “the production, dissemination, circulation and use of emotions and values, norms and obligations in the social space” (2012:266). Acknowledging Fassin’s contributions, Mellino demonstrated that the political and epistemic order of humanitarian reason—centered around the moral lexicon of care, compassion, hospitality, humanity, suffering, and victimhood—has been structurally subsumed by neoliberal capitalism (in line with Mellino 2019, see also Ramsay 2019).

Given the heterogeneous and mutating web of actors, institutions, legislations and territorial contexts in which asylum “hits the ground,” Lauren Martin (2020) warned against the use of the “industrial complex” lens (in addition to Dadusc and Mudu 2020, see also Andersson 2014; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013; Marchi 2024a), which has often deployed to describe the political economy of asylum. If it is undeniable that circuits of value integral to asylum are driven by a common and pervasive neoliberal rationality which has progressively reshaped processes of population governance, it is also necessary to trouble an analytical gaze that would risk the indirect framing (in consistent and coordinated terms) of a social field which is characterized by frictions, ruptures and inconsistencies: indeed, “conceptualizing highly contested, faltering, fragile economic relationships as coherent industries gives them an independence that reproduces, rather than challenges, their power” (Martin 2020:4). In addition, Martin notes, one should reflect on how trends towards privatization and outsourcing work to restructure authority: “The question becomes not only ‘who profits?’ but how is state authority reorganized? How are these assemblages composed?” (Martin 2020:6). From this perspective, NGOs, social cooperatives, and private companies entrusted with the state mandate to oversee asylum-seekers not only profit from the asylum system, but they also wield authority and operate on behalf of political interests.

Political authority is progressively divided into pieces and fragmented under the imperative of efficiency, with the emergence of site-specific assemblages of power which trend towards capital accumulation. From this perspective, asylum emerges as an interesting field for

analyzing “operations of capital” (Mezzadra, Neilson 2019). With this concept, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson re-conceptualized the geographies of state and capital, with the latter conceived as a crucial “political actor” which is more and more difficult to isolate and separate from the former. Although requiring a certain degree of abstraction, “operations of capital” could be framed as complex concatenations of actors, procedures, arrangements, extra-legal (racialized) violence which shape specific territories, social relationships and political authority with the aim of ensuring capital accumulation in particular ways.

Among works that have explored the political economy of asylum include a recent body of literature which attempted to unveil the exploitation of asylum seekers’ labor. Ali Baghat (2020), Gemma Bird and Dave Schmid (2021), Shae Frydenlun and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn (2022), Mouna Maroufi (2022), and Prem Kumar Rajaram (2018) have all elaborated on the exploitative geographies of asylum and their implications within broader patterns of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000). Asylum implies and reproduces a series of—legal and extra-legal—differences which are particularly suited to fostering the functioning of an already highly racialized, segmented, and differentiated labor market. Moritz Altenried et al. (2018), Benjamin Etzold (2017), and Mouna Maroufi (2017), among others, have analyzed the German asylum regime in particular, its “logistical transformation,” and the (para)institutional procedures aimed at forcibly channeling asylum seekers into specific local labor niches. Gennaro Avallone (et al. 2021), Andrea Cagioni (2020), Antonello Mangano (2021), Domenico Perrotta (et al. 2021) explored the generalized employment of asylum seekers in the agriculture sector in Italy, showing the increasing relevance of seeking asylum population in sustaining agriculture supply chain.

Reflecting on the constitutive connections between humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012) and the labor market, Enrica Rigo and Nick Dines (2017) have advanced the intriguing notion of “humanitarian exploitation” (see also Ramsay 2019). With this concept, the authors aimed to

demonstrate that “the humanitarian apparatus produces its own *peculiar political economy of management and exploitation of the migrant workforce*” (Dines and Rigo 2017:91; my translation from Italian, emphasis my own). However, despite an explicit mention of such peculiarities, these were not elaborated on. What does this understanding of “humanitarian exploitation” add to contemporary debates on racial capitalism and migrant labor exploitation? What renders the concept of “humanitarian exploitation” so peculiar and specific when compared to other forms and regimes of migrant labor exploitation?

As anticipated in Chapter 1 and above, what distinguishes the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” (Novak 2021) from other “migration infrastructures” (Biao and Lindquist 2014) is the fact that the former does not only condition migrants’ mobility, but also affects and reorganize migrants’ daily life and, consequently, their making as laborers. Therefore, to understand the peculiar traits of “humanitarian exploitation” (Dines and Rigo 2017), one must also unveil the contours of what Rigo (2022) calls “humanitarian reproduction” (see Section 4.3). In *Border as Method*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) contend that the proliferation of borders on a global scale has brought about a fragmentation and multiplication of “figures of labor.” In particular, they warn against the Marxian historicist tendency to consider, for instance, the European modern industrial worker as the paradigmatic figure of labor under capitalism. Combining postcolonial and feminist theory, the authors recognize the historical relevance of gendered and racial differences in shaping hierarchically arranged labor regimes, some of which are characterized by institutionalized technologies of coercion. Further, they contend that it is necessary to consider how distinct regimes of social reproduction shape specific “figures of labor.” From this perspective, the asylum seeker emerges not only as a figure through which we can investigate the above-mentioned dynamics of confinement, exclusion, segregation, and (coerced) mobility, but also as a distinct “figure of labor” within the broader

typology which needs to be properly theorized. The development of the concept of the humanitarian labor regime is an attempt in this direction.

3.2 ASYLUM, COERCION, RACE, SURPLUS

Letting die is not an apocalypse. It is not a media event, like a massacre, an earthquake, or a famine that kills large numbers in a compressed period of time. Nor is it a Malthusian problem of inadequate global food supply. It is a stealthy violence that consigns large numbers of people to lead short and limited lives.

— Tania Li (2010:1).

Marx dedicated important passages of *Das Kapital* to the legal and socio-political violence at the heart of so-called process of “primitive accumulation” (1976, see Chapter 26): that is, a violence which is perpetually legitimized, reproduced and internalized within the social body, and which subtly (yet substantially) forces wage laborers to sell their labor power to sustain themselves. Once the relations governing the exchange of capital are established and naturalized, “masses of people” (Marx 1976) are converted into workers who cannot escape a state of exploitation. The civic and political freedom of the liberal worker-subject is thus constantly negotiated in line with the critical necessity of living through (wage) labor. The horizon of exploitation, which is established by relentless processes of primitive accumulation, however, is lived and experienced differently. As I discuss below, Marxist feminism endeavored to explore the array of (gendered) activities essential to the reproduction of (working) life in capitalist societies which are unpaid and unrecognized as labor. Certain populations, which suffer often interlaced forms of oppression based on class, gender, or race, are subjected to specific regimes of exploitation, with unpaid labor only one dimension of this broader trend.

The contentious relationship between liberty and coercion which characterizes capitalist societies acquires a qualitatively different meaning if one considers that regimes of

institutionalized coerced labor (foundational to the development of capitalism) also developed in line with the European colonial project (Jung 2006; Look Lai 1993; Saunders 1984; Williams 1994). From this perspective, as noted by some authors, Marx's oeuvre has had an ambiguous positioning in regard to the relationship between race and capital (Mellino and Pomella 2020). While Marx certainly recognized the European colonial project as a pivotal moment for the emergence of the capitalist system, he nonetheless did not elaborate an exhaustive theory on "the racial logic of capital" (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012). Overall, his analytical perspective was influenced by a historicist vision, which considered European "free" wage labor as the paradigmatic regime of exploitation, while regimes of coerced labor were considered to be backward and obsolete.⁴⁶

Scholars of racial capitalism have contributed to a substantial decentering of an orthodox Marxist reading of capitalist development (Melamed 2015; Robinson 2000; Quijano 2000). By placing the site of the plantation and racial slavery at the heart of capitalist operations, they contributed to "stretch"—to paraphrasing Fanon's famous dictum (1963:40)—some of the more Eurocentric limits of Marxist theory. This scholarship elaborated on the racially differentiated yet enmeshed labor regimes constituting global processes of accumulation. This means, for

⁴⁶ The debate on what we might call the Eurocentric biases of Marx's theory is far from over. Over the last decades, various scholars have confronted this topic, coming to different conclusions (see, among others: Anderson 2010; da Silva 2022; De Genova 2018, 2023; Dubilet 2015; Dussel 1990; Mellino and Pomella 2020; Musto 2023; Palmi 2020; Robinson 2000). Largely, however, Marx's positioning in relation to colonial slavery and modern racism can be considered ambivalent and ambiguous. Those who tend to consider Marx's theory not only Eurocentric often quote the famous passage of *Capital*, where he affirmed that:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield (Marx 1976:915).

In other writings, however, Marx seemed quite complicit with the British colonial expansion in India as a form of civilizing project (see Palmi 2020). Enrique Dussel, for instance, advanced the hypothesis that over the last years of his life Marx started to recalibrate his theoretical and political positioning in relation to race and colonialism. Overall, I align myself with a series of studies that have acknowledged the importance of Marx's theory, on the one hand, but also demonstrated the presence of a sort of historicist view informing his theoretical framework, on the other (see, for instance, da Silva 2022; Mellino and Pomella 2020; Robinson 2000). It is indeed undeniable that the European "free" wage laborer is deployed by Marx as the paradigmatic figure for exploring the law of capital accumulation, while coerced colonial labor is overall marginal within his broader analytical and theoretical perspective.

instance, that “from 1492 onwards, racialized, coerced, and less-than-free migratory labour was central to the rise and development of capitalist modernity” (Danewid 2021:150; see also Quijano 2000). In this regard, it has been noted that capital does not level and homogenize (racial and gendered) differences; rather, it implicates, exacerbates, and hierarchically integrates these differences through complex legal and extra-legal arrangements, with the aim to maximize profit and value extraction, on the one hand, and discipline and fragment the workforce, on the other.

As far as concerns this research, thinking through the logic of capital through the “shadow of the plantation” (Haider 2017) allows for an understanding of the radically different scenarios of coercion instantiated by the workings of race. The “subject of race” (Mbembe 2017), a founding figure of capitalist modernity, can be viewed in terms of a socio-legally dehumanized entity programmed to fuel the capitalist engine. Cast out towards the limits of what is considered human, the racialized “slave” was an objectified-subject; a “non-being” (Fanon 1963), turned into a pure commodity, or in other words, a “*man-of-metal, man-of-merchandise, man-of-money*” (Mbembe 2017:47, emphasis original). Deprived of human dignity and autonomy, s/he was crafted into a disposable, fungible, and perishable worker to be brutally (hyper)exploited until exhaustion and depletion. Race, in this regard, does not only embody an index representing the degree to which one might be differently exposed to exploitation, depletion, vulnerability or death (Gilmore 2007). It signals an “abyssal difference” (de Sousa Santos 2007); a legal, socio-economic, and existential horizon which is incommensurable with the conflicting scenario between civic freedom and the necessity of work which the European “free” wage worker experiences.

As pure property, coerced labor was unpaid and often involved racialized violence which could even exceed economic calculus (Barchiesi, Jackson 2019). From this perspective, some scholars have proposed considering “coerced labor” as a form of “constant capital” (Mbembe

2017; Wilderson 2017). According to Marx, “constant capital” refers to that portion of capital which is “turned into means of production,” i.e., factories, land, and buildings, while “variable capital” pertains to “that part of capital which is turned into labor-power” (1976:317), i.e., the workforce’s salary. Coerced labor, however, cannot strictly be considered to be a form a “variable capital,” as it did not involve any economic remuneration. From this perspective, Denise Ferreira da Silva noted that Marx’s equation of value needs to be partially amended. Her analytical insight is worthy of a lengthy quote:

In wage labor, there is appropriation of partial value-created, which I will call exploitation, under legal obligation; in slave labor, there is appropriation of the total value-created, which I will call expropriation, under violent coercion. [...] The value equation (purely economic regardless of the juridical situation of the worker, free or not) is: c (value means of production [instruments and raw materials]) + v (value of the worker [wage]) + sp (value produced by labor – value of worker) = value of the commodity. In slavery, however, the equation is not the same: c (value of means of production) + v (value of the worker) + s (value of produced by labor); that is, there is no surplus value or a difference between value produced by labor and value of the worker. [...] on the positive side of the accumulation of money (to be turned into capital) enabled by slavery, *there is an excess* ($s = sp + v$) that is not registered in the classic historical materialist account of capitalist accumulation. (da Silva 2022:107-108, emphasis my own).

According to da Silva, coerced labor enables the accumulation of “an excess”—a surplus of surplus value—which is essential to the sustaining of capitalism. As I discuss below, this point also opens up a reframing of the Marxian notion of “relative surplus population.” Denise Ferreira da Silva’s intuition reveals a structural intimacy between *racial* coercion and capital, in that she contends that capital depends on the perpetual recreation of *racial* regimes of labor coercion. These regimes sustain landscapes of unpaid labor (e.g. reproductive labor) and also assure the legal (and extra-legal) making of a disposable, fungible and perishable labor force to work in “low-skilled” niches of labor under highly depletive conditions, such as extreme

precarity, informality, racial and gender-based extortions, underpayment, overworking, lack of welfare guarantees, etc.

Building on existing literature highlighting the inherent connection between forced labor systems and the accumulation of capital, various efforts have emerged to expose the global spread of forced labor forms and systems in the postcolonial era (Bhattacharyya 2018; Gore and Lebaron 2019; Lebaron 2015; Lebaron and Phillips 2019). In light of the structural intimacy between capital accumulation and *racial* slavery, these studies explored the complex modalities through which distinct dynamics of coercion with regards to labor have become rearticulated in the context of neoliberal democracy—where racial equality is presented as one of its founding principles (Mbembe 2017). To understand landscapes of coerced labor, one must look beyond the conventional notion of “modern-day slavery” (O’Connell Davidson 2015). In other words, the debate on “modern day-slavery” reinforces the liberal idea that the state (and society, more broadly) are external to the polymorphic dynamics governing coerced labor.

According to this liberal perspective, labor in a capitalist system is exempted from consideration as “coerced labor,” which instead is seen as a mere relic of a pre-modern era and confined solely to the master-slave relationship, where the slave has no autonomy. Without denying the existence of situations of total and extreme bondage (ILO 2022b), when talking about contemporary regimes of coerced labor, I refer to an array of “liminal” situations in which freedom and unfreedom are constantly negotiated. As brilliantly noted by Genevieve Lebaron:

Grounded in a classical liberal conception of states as benign and neutral actors, neo-slavery accounts often overlook the role of states—especially through labor and immigration policy—in fostering conditions in which the most severe forms of exploitation can thrive. [...] Not only do such approaches create little room to understand the liminal forms of labor that do not fall neatly into either side of the binary (particularly feminized forms of work such as unpaid domestic work and sex work) but they also tend to gloss over the substantial unfreedoms that exist in so-called free labor (2015:3-4).

Lebaron invites one to “approach free and unfree labor as part of a single continuum of capitalist relations of labor exploitation” (2015:4), paying specific attention to how labor and immigration policy, on the one hand, and racial and gendered factors, on the other, contribute to shape “figures of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) subjected to extreme disposability and perishability.

Chapter 1 took into account forms of “secondary exploitation” (Bernards and Sorenberg 2021) integral to the European asylum regime. These include, for instance, legal and extra-legal dynamics of “dequalifying,” socio-spatial segregation, and an obligation to assent to specific pathways for education or professional development as forms of civic gratitude (Carbone et al. 2018; Maroufi 2017). Building on this idea, this chapter analyzes the role of “humanitarian reproduction” (Rigo 2022) in shaping specific figures of disposability and fungibility. Nonetheless, these forms of “secondary exploitation,” which are integral to “humanitarian reproduction,” reveal the direct involvement of the European institutions in channeling and forcing specific populations into specific labor niches. To this end, several authors (including Bales and Mayblin 2019; Frydenlund and Cullen Dunn 2019; Maroufi 2022) have explored the role of asylum regimes in directly favoring landscapes of coerced and unfree labor.

The reframing and rearticulation of the relationship between freedom and unfreedom, or between liberty and coercion, in light of the “abyssal difference” (de Sousa Santos 2007) instantiated by the working of race in capitalist societies, brings us to another interrelated issue: namely, the crafting of pools of excess workers adapted to the practice of capital accumulation. In recent years, various studies critically engaged with the Marxian notion of a “relative surplus population,” with a specific regard to racialized migrant populations (Bernards and Soederberg 2021; Karatasli 2022; Li 2010; McIntre and Nast 2011; Merrill 2011; Mezzadra 2023; Neilson and Stubbs 2011). In chapter 25 of *Capital*, Marx contended that “a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of capitalist accumulation” as well as “a condition for the

existence of the capitalist mode of production” (Marx 1976:785). Capital, on the one hand, deploys a series of managerial, socio-technical and spatial strategies for reducing living labor costs. Technological improvements and relocation of production, for instance, might contribute to (temporarily) exclude sections of the workforce from wage labor arrangements in specific territories. On the other hand, the perpetual presence of “potential labor” (Mezzadra 2023), of a pool of workers “in excess,” is necessary for assuring the continual growth of capital. This perpetual (re)creation of “surplus populations” is in turn a foundational element in disciplining the workforce and increasing profits. Moreover, the constant presence of unemployed workers, ever ready to take the place of unproductive or riotous ones, serves to weaken solidarity ties among workers and consequently obliges them to accept increasingly exploitative and precarious conditions.

In framing his theory, Marx drew significantly from the context of Britain in the 19th century, marked by the expansion of modern industry, the urbanization of working-class masses, and the reconfiguration of the agricultural economy. These socio-economic changes had resulted in a systemic redundancy of workers. Far from being expelled from wage labor relations once and for all, unemployed masses cyclically (re)entered the realm of production (Marx 1976:794-796). Although Marx acknowledged the centrality of racial slavery and colonialism in shaping these patterns of capital accumulation, the European “free” wage worker monopolized the stage in his analytical view. Coerced labor, on the contrary, was not considered as a paradigmatic form of the “relative surplus population.” Given Marx’s ambiguous positioning on race and colonialism, this elision is not so surprising. However, as we saw above, coerced labor entertains a peculiar association with capital and surplus, which we need to investigate in relation to the notion of “relative surplus population.”

The key issue here concerns the relationship between race, surplus, and death. In *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe affirmed that “race is one of the raw materials from which

difference and surplus—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent *without limit*—are produced” (2017:34, emphasis my own). In this sense, coerced labor was programmed to be exploited *without limits*. As such, the accumulation of surplus value enabled by coerced labor was made possible both qualitatively and quantitatively: qualitatively, because, as noted by da Silva (2022), the prospect of slavery fundamentally changes the Marxian equation of value, and quantitatively, because the body of the slave could be literally exploited until physical death. This implies that coerced labor was inherently linked to a horizon of mortality and impermanence. Its establishment necessitated an ongoing and systematic surplus of coerced labor, readily available to replace those who perished.⁴⁷ Coerced labor creates a context for an objectified subject structurally haunted by the specter of death. Being a “subject of race” (Mbembe 2017) was equivalent to experiencing an existential situation in which (potential) death might be perpetually realized in concrete.

The intimate interlacing between race, surplus, and death which characterizes the state of coerced labor allows for a more nuanced reading of the tension between “accumulation by dispossession” and “accumulation by exploitation” (Harvey 2003). As noted by Gargi Bhattacharyya, for instance, “many are dispossessed and displaced, but the route to absorption into capitalist formations remains unclear or, at least, unorthodox” (Bhattacharyya 2018:177; see also Li 2010).

The structural discrepancy between dispossession and exploitation, mediated by the necropolitical working of race, is evident if one looks at the functioning of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” (Novak 2021). This is the case not only in relation to the Mediterranean deathscape (Casid 2018), but also if one considers forms of prolonged “organized abandonment”⁴⁸ (Harvey 2001; Gilmore 2007) and the necropolitical effects experienced by

⁴⁷ On the innate horizon of death integral to the working of capital, see James Tyner (2019).

⁴⁸ As anticipated in the pages above, Barbara Pinelli (2018) advanced the notion of “social abandonment” to describe one of the core effects behind the receptive logic of the European asylum regime. Here, I also refer to the idea of “organized abandonment” to stress the direct involvement of state institutions in the bio-necropolitical management of the

asylum seekers once integrated within the “reception supply chain” (Mellino 2019). This discussion echoes the story of Ousmane (see Chapter 4.2), who lived for one year and a half in a former military barrack in Northern Italy in miserable conditions with hundreds of asylum seekers. These conditions also brought about the death of Sandrine Bakayoko, a 25-year-old woman from Côte d’Ivoire, on January 2, 2017 while housed in the same barracks as Ousmane (Meltingpot 2017). Afterwards, he was transferred to the south of the province of Verona, where he immediately became a part of the contingent labor force necessary to sustain the agricultural industry.

On the one hand, the making of coerced labor, as the paradigmatic form of “relative surplus population,” is essential to capitalist development. On the other, the horizon of abandonment and death is so implicated in the “racial logic of capital” (Chakravartty, da Silva 2012) to the extent that processes of dispossession are not necessarily followed by exploitation. As noted by Stefano Harney, racial capitalism’s peculiarity consists of its ambiguous relation with death and perishability:

The Atlantic slave trade was the birth of modern logistics, as it was also the birth of a new kind of war on the human species, and of racial capitalism, which amounts to saying the same thing. This trade entailed the first global movement of mass commodities, voluminous and grotesque. Moreover these humans were also perishable and volatile commodities that could “*go missing*” and were hard “to extract” requiring complex, even diabolical, logistical technologies, supported by finance, insurance, law, and of course state and extra state violence (Harney 2018, emphasis my own).

Therefore, in proposing to consider coerced labor as the paradigmatic form of the “relative surplus population,” and vice versa, we can formulate two interlaced propositions that will help to introduce the operational logic of the humanitarian labor regime.

population seeking asylum (Mellino 2019). The idea of “organized abandonment,” in other words, is useful as it enables to come to terms with the fact that abandonment is not an outcome of a politics without resources or “the retreat of the state, but a reorganization of governance” and a “strategic exercise of power” (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020: 7).

First, specific “relative surplus populations” are haunted by a series of racial procedures and necropolitical shadows to the point that dispossession is not always followed by exploitation. As the story of Ousmane reveals, asylum seekers can be alternately moved to economically depressed areas, or segregated from the rest of the working population, becoming in the process (temporarily) unproductive. This, however, does not mean their presence does not generate a profit. As Ina Zharkevich (2021) suggests, we might understand that a “political economy of waiting” is integral to the European asylum regime, which is based on the privatization of management services (Darling 2016a, 2016b; Novak 2019). In other words, the “refugification” (see Chapter 1) of undocumented migrants assures the proliferations of management and services economy irrespectively of the fact that asylum seekers are directly exploited on the labor market.

Second, a “relative surplus population” is an abstract and generic concept which must be analyzed in relation to the workings of a specific set of mobility politics which also correspond to distinct reproductive regimes, as well as in relation to the interlaced workings of class, gender, and race. In other word, it might be said that forms and modalities of disposability and redundancy are not lived and experienced in the same way. While the extreme precarity fostered by labor markets under neoliberal capitalism has brought about an increasing number of short-term and unstable forms of employment, and more and more people have experienced redundancy and unemployment (Mbembe 2017; Tsing 2009), not every worker experiences these “entries” and “exits” from the labor market in the same way. For instance, it is essential to investigate how various systems of social reproduction influence the circumstances of disposability, fungibility, and redundancy within the labor force. These circumstances can be fundamentally different from those faced by a native unemployed worker who, aside from holding citizenship, has not experienced the destructive effects of the asylum system. Additionally, the (relatively more) privileged workers may enjoy certain

advantages, both material and symbolic, stemming in part from what W.E.B. du Bois (2007; see also Roediger 1991) referred to as the “wage of Whiteness.”

This also means that the crafting of the population of asylum seekers as a distinct type of “relative surplus population” differs from the making of other “non-native” populations, which have been nonetheless subjected to different migratory regimes. Exploitative dynamics, however, are not the only characteristic of such regimes; as discussed in Chapter 2, ethno-racial formations and forms of racial subjective embodiment (Ahmend 2012; Hook 2008), which are exogenous to asylum regimes, might contribute to exacerbate the labor subjugation of specific groups of asylum seekers. Therefore, the making of distinct figures of coerced labor as a relative surplus population is always pursued at the complex (and always site-specific) encounter between distinct politics of reproduction and mobility, on the one hand, and ethno-racial, class and gendered formations, on the other.

3.3 THE MAKING OF COERCED-AS-SURPLUS LABOR: ASYLUM AND THE LOGISTICS OF REPRODUCTION

Most of the people I work with still live in reception centres [...] The bosses realized that migrants from reception centers work harder, migrants from reception centres don't know the law, don't speak Italian and that's why they always call us to work. We are *forced* to work hard, they take advantage of that. *We have been organized to do this kind of work.*⁴⁹

In her book *La Straniera*, Enrica Rigo (2022) draws from feminist scholarship to scrutinize the contemporary migratory experience in between Africa and Europe. Adopting a gendered perspective on migration, Rigo contends, does not mean focusing exclusively on the social experience of women migrants. Although sensitive to the sexual division of labor, the author posits that a gendered perspective on migration is one way to account for the countless everyday

⁴⁹ Ada, a migrant from the Republic of Benin, Interview, June 20, 2021, Verona, my translation from Italian, emphasis my own.

activities, experiences, and technologies essential to the reproduction and sustainment of the migrant (working) body. Instead of considering the increasingly systemic involvement (both formal and informal) of migrant women and negatively racialized communities in European care economies in light of the neoliberal restructuring of welfare systems (Anderson 2012), the author aims to make visible strategies and modalities through which these communities sustain their own survival.

As discussed in Chapter 2, migrants' existence is assured through evolving "counter-infrastructures of survival" which provide information, resources, and means of sustaining an economy of (racial) affectivity and sociality. Given the ontological transnationality of the migratory experience, these counter-infrastructures include multiple sites and temporalities. For instance, the employment of digital technology to communicate with relatives and acquaintances abroad adds a new dimension of information exchange divorced from physical space. For many asylum seekers met during the fieldwork, calls with distant loved ones were sort of an everyday ritual to be celebrated either before or after the working hours. What at first glance might appear to be a mundane action in fact embodied a vital moment of affectivity.

Rigo's analysis has a specific spatio-temporal focus. In particular, it considers the radical transformations in the management of migrant populations which occurred in the wake of the 2008 global crisis in the European space. As we have seen in Chapter 1, over the last fifteen years, asylum has become the key infrastructural mode for governing migration: this, I argue, embodies a racialized infrastructure connecting various actors, spaces, forms of knowledge, and technologies in which systemic and variegated elements of coercion rearticulate when and how migrants' bodies are managed by European institutions.

Far from being limited to governing and affecting mobility patterns, Rigo goes on, asylum does something more. To be more precise, it embodies "a system of control of human life and its reproduction" (Rigo, 2018:515; see also Rigo 2022). Therefore, Rigo does not exclusively focus on "counter-infrastructures of survival." Most notably, she attempts to unveil the

institutionalized modalities through which asylum seekers' (working) bodies are reproduced and kept alive through a specific array of coercive procedures and technologies. As we have seen above, acknowledging this substantial difference—*from the control of mobility to the control of life*—helps us to approach the pivotal question concerning the peculiarities of the nature of “humanitarian exploitation” (Rigo and Dines 2017). What are the critical and defining traits of what Rigo (2022) calls “humanitarian reproduction”? Moreover, what kind of “figures of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) are pursued through what I call the humanitarian labor regime?

To answer these pivotal questions, it is necessary to touch upon the issue of the relation between social reproduction and the racial ordering of the world. Although a unifying definition of social reproduction is difficult (or indeed, impossible) to deduce, with this term we refer to the variegated and countless (everyday) activities, experiences and technologies which are fundamental in reproducing and sustaining life-as-working-capacity within capitalist societies (Alquati 2021; Federici 2004, 2012; Fortunati 1981; Mies 2014). Social reproduction, from this perspective, includes but goes well beyond biological reproduction. In other words, biological reproduction is necessarily and constitutively integrated with a series of activities, experiences and technologies which are in turn eminently social. Often associated with gendered, unpaid, and unrecognized labor, such as managing a household or providing caregiving services, household realm or with the provision of caring services by public institutions in specific moments and (privileged) places of capitalist expansion, the contemporary moment has been characterized by an endemic crisis in social reproduction (Bhattacharyya 2018; Fraser 2017; Mezzadri 2022). An era marked by the financialization and privatization of caring services, in which negatively racialized communities and impoverished classes are fundamental to providing continuous assistance and support to the few who can afford a system of “private welfare.” Other than caring for the wellbeing of others, however, racialized communities must also sustain themselves. Analytically speaking, these communities bear the burden of what might be called

“double reproduction.” The consequences of this doubled effort, however, are marked: As Rai (2011) points out, it has systemic and depleting effects on the racialized body, which constantly grapples with the challenges of socio-physical survival. An illustrative example of these dynamics can be observed in the processes of social reproduction that were at work during the era of racial slavery.

In her article *Gender History, Global History, and Atlantic Slavery*, Diana Paton (2022) argues that in order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the importance of coerced labor for the expansion of capitalism on a global scale, one has to consider the oft-neglected role played by Black women as “breeders”, either in the African continent and in the landscape of plantation. Since the rise of capitalism, the “black womb” (Weinbaum 2019) has embodied the crucial bio-social fulcrum for the making and sustaining of coerced labor. The “plantation”, from this perspective, was site for the control of social reproduction; a regime based on the double and integrated hyper-exploitation of the Black (collective) body, at once a reproductive body *and* a working body. Although heuristically separated, these two movements are so intimately interlaced that could be seen as a unique racialized procedure of value-extraction-as-human-destitution. These racialized procedures, in the words of Alys Eve Weinbaum (2019), embodied the “slave episteme”; namely, the modern institution of a socio-economic system (i.e. capitalism) which in order to exist and proliferate requires the perpetual social re(pro)duction of humans-as-slaves.

Diana Paton and Alys Eve Weinbaum’s works invites the consideration of racial slavery (the foundational underside of capitalism), as a specific regime of social reproduction in and of itself. Although the two authors primarily focus on the Black woman, a tragic figure of modernity who faced the possibility of betraying her maternal mandate by killing her descendants as the ultimate act in order to free them from slavery (Morrison 1987), the “reproductive slavery regime” (Weinbaum 2019) included a series of racial procedures and coercive technologies. Take

the slave ship (Rediker 2007), for instance. By dehumanizing and dispossessing Black people of their own autonomy, it also had to provide a means of minimal subsistence to those being forcibly transported. A similar situation was at play in the space of plantation, where slaves were kept as waking zombies in captivity (Mbembe 2017). Keeping and reproducing a body capable of work in the context of human captivity and social death (Patterson 1982), the “slavery reproductive regime” (Weinbaum 2019) implied the possibility of becoming a regime of life destruction and suffocation. This regime was characterized by the reproduction of forms of life-as-labor, which implicitly implied annihilation (as discussed above). One might say, in this regard, that the “reproductive regime of slavery” is a regime of social reproduction just as much as of social destruction.

Reproducing a dying life-as-labor, a (non)existence perpetually haunted by the possibility of becoming-real-death: this was the ambiguous horizon of the “reproductive slavery regime” described by Weinbaum (2019). Such a regime was based on the racial appropriation of Black women’s bodies and breeding capacities, which instantiates a broader array of racial institutions and coercive technologies we might frame in terms of minimal-as-destructive reproduction. Thus, the “reproductive slavery regime” (Weinbaum 2019) refers to an institutionalized racial and coercive structure assuring the making and reproduction of forms of life-as-labor, programmed to be exploited *without limits* (Mbembe 2017).

Needless to say, the “reproductive slavery regime” (Weinbaum 2019) is not a simple artifact to analyze. Given the “racial logic of capital” (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012), it is of pivotal importance to explore the modalities through which forms of coerced and unfree labor are reproduced by specific regimes of social reproduction (Gore and LeBaron 2019). Alessandra Mezzadri (2022; see also Bhattacharya 2018; McIntre and Nast 2011) proposed to frame these regimes in terms of “raced social reproduction,” referring to an array of:

surplus-making techniques at play in capitalism sitting between annihilation – or *necropolitics* – and the regeneration of the reserve army. These techniques shape multiple hierarchies of disposability crossing realms of work and life and manufacturing varied forms of social and economic redundancy (Mezzadri 2021:389).

Regimes of “raced social reproduction,” however, are not stable and homogeneous. Rather, they vary according to societal, geographical and political context, as well as according to shifting political economic conjunctures.

The analytical and theoretical challenge, therefore, consists of delineating and identifying the protean contours of these regimes. Chris Smith and Pun Ngai (2007; see also Ngai 2016), for instance, theorized the “dormitory labor regime” to make visible a new “spatial politics of labor” in contemporary China. The mass-scale construction and institutionalization of dormitories for laborers adjacent to the factory has proved to be an effective “spatial fix” (Harvey 2001; see next section) deployed by Chinese industries to reproduce, access and discipline cheap, contingent, and disposable labor. Deprived by citizenship rights and lacking the economic means to afford an independent housing solution, many lower-class, rural Chinese individuals are forced into dormitories built close to the factory. Even if the authors do not overlook class contradictions and forms of “minor resistance” (see also Ngai 2005), they contend that the “dormitory labor regime” embodies a crucial socio-spatial tool for the recent intensification of Chinese economic development. Being subjected to depletive working conditions and life rhythms, workers spend their lives in between the two poles of an integrated socio-spatial system: the factory and the dormitory.

In exploring the garment production industry in contemporary India, Alessandra Mezzadri (2017) theorized the “sweatshop regime” as a constitutive interlacing of socio-spatial arrangements which serves as the foundation of reproducing specific forms of disposable and unfree labor, which are in turn essential to assuring the sustainability of the globalized clothing industry. Her research provides fundamental insights on the role of social forces and factors

(such as ethnicity, gender, labor and migration policy, family roles, and spatial organization) converge to shape a specific dynamic of unfreedom at work. In particular, Mezzadri refers to “broader networks of oppression that both exceed (or pre-exist) the constitution of ‘labor’ and ‘laboring’ in the sweatshop and at the same time strongly shape them. These networks cross realms of social reproduction that are not only confined to the daily survival of the workforce (as in Pun and Smith 2007) but also include workers’ place of origin” (Mezzadri 2017:3).

Drawing from these ethnographically informed studies, I theorize the humanitarian labor regime as a way of describing a specific system of “raced social reproduction” which pursues the making of a distinct “figure of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013)—the asylum seeker—subject to a peculiar dynamic of disposability, fungibility, redundancy which in turn reveals moments of unfreedom and coercion. The humanitarian labor regime emerged in Europe following the 2008 global crisis, marking a shift in the spatio-racial politics of labor, as outlined by Ngai and Smith (2007). This regime was implemented by European (state) capital and aimed to compel a contingent labor force into subordinate positions during a period of systemic political and economic crisis, as detailed in section 3.5. Here, I ask: what are the defining features of the humanitarian labor regime?

As mentioned in Chapter 1 (see 1.3), a critical and distinctive feature of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” concerns its logistical rationality. Drawing from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), I deployed the “logistical population” lens to refer to the asylum seeker population, which is logistically managed, moved and warehoused within the “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021). Revealing a disturbing similarity with the Atlantic Slave Trade’s driving logic, this system dispossesses asylum seekers of their own autonomy and humanity, and treats them as “commodified objects” (Vianelli 2021) incapable of caring for themselves and organizing their own life. This logistical rationality, in this sense, is not only a matter of coercive mobility, but also highlights the pervasive procedures and techniques which deeply influence and transform asylum seekers’ everyday life. Asylum seekers are often understood to be devalued

and passive beings, and the resulting sociolegal and spatial regime often serves to both destroy and logistically reorganize their means of survival.

In this regard, the humanitarian labor regime includes an intertwinement of several elements. First, it includes a legal order that is both “contingent” and characterized by “judicial opacity” (Fontanari 2019), in which the population of asylum seekers gains access to political and social rights in different ways (and for different durations). Additionally, such a system subjects people to forms of legal blackmail, in the variable forms of either civic reward or territorial restriction as in the case of Germany or in the broader context of Dublin regulation (Maroufi 2017; Picozza 2017). Moreover, the humanitarian labor regime constitutes a social horizon characterized by a dynamic of (racial) subordination and (in)formal disciplining enacted by a series of institutionalized figures (e.g. social workers, psychologists, judges, teachers, policeman) who exercise a combination of cure, control and discipline (Agier 2011; D’Ambrosio 2018; Lentin and Nedelkovic 2021; Perazzo 2023; Sorgoni 2011). There is also a dimension of spatial confinement (Campesi 2018) and “forced cohabitation” (Della Puppa, Sanò 2021), in which asylum seekers are coercively and randomly warehoused in reception centers where they have to live with unknown people with different ethno-cultural backgrounds, and where they are often subjected to an imposed dietary regime. In addition, they must also adapt to a series of other structural conditions, such as overcrowding, poor hygienic conditions and lack of medical and welfare services. Reception facilities, when viewed as this context, serve as vital spaces where one can observe the reproduction and organization of devalued and racialized forms of life. These facilities are critical in understanding the social-legal, spatial, and racial dynamics at play. Thus, the logistics of asylum instantiates a coercive and racial regime in which the subject is objectified (Vianelli 2021) and thought of as a passive entity to be arbitrarily moved, warehoused, nurtured, punished and alternately rewarded.

In similar ways to the “reproductive slavery regime” (Weinbaum 2019), asylum seekers’ humanity is *racially* devalued; in the name of this racial calculus, their body is subjected to an ambiguous politics of life. This reflection echoes Peter Redfield’s (2005) discussion of humanitarianism in terms of “minimal biopolitics,” referring to a governmental apparatus which ensures the body has access to the minimum means of physical subsistence. However, when lives are racially devalued and degraded, as in the case of the “slavery reproductive regime” (Weinbaum 2019) or in the case of the humanitarian labor regime, the line of demarcation between “minimal biopolitics” (Redfield 2005) and “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003) becomes indistinguishable and unstable (Puar 2017). The multiple deaths of asylum seekers in European reception centers or on the Mediterranean migration route, too often overlooked, are tragic reminders of the constitutive blurring between a politics of life and a politics of death integral to the humanitarian labor regime.⁵⁰

In light of a systemic social reproduction crisis (Fraser 2017; Mezzadri 2022), care—or a specific racial and destructive politics of care—is rearticulated around the space of reception. The institution of public housing policies and the provision of public politics of care, for instance, are thus replaced by the ambiguous space of reception, where the dimension of care assumes a very ambiguous meaning, and is it also outsourced and financialized. To a certain extent, this situation partially resembles the above-mentioned Chinese “dormitory labor regime” (Ngai, Smith 2007). In other words, the humanitarian labor regime exhibits a spatio-racial politics of labor that resembles the factory-dormitory model rendered as a “factory-reception” model; such a development echoes Ceccagno and Sacchetto’s (2020) discussion of the “Sinicization” of work and employment in contemporary Europe (see also Ngai et al. 2020).

⁵⁰ On the constitutive interlacing between “biopolitics” and “necropolitics” of humanitarianism, see Mellino (2019). Drawing from Puar (2017), Pallister-Wilkins (2022a) refers to the humanitarian management of asylum seekers as a form of “debilitating life.”

However, a critical difference with the humanitarian labor regime is its relative elasticity. While in the case of the “dormitory labor regime,” there is an official and (spatially) strict integration between single firms, factories and their dormitories, the humanitarian labor regime comprises more malleable and scattered infrastructure, where the integration between factories and reception centers changes significantly according to the territorial and economic landscapes in which they are situated. The reception system can be framed in terms of a sort of *scattered dormitory* which warehouses a distinct type of coerced labor subjected to a specific racial politics of life which is both employed and recruited according to the distinct economic necessities of specific territories. This conflation between reception and the factory means that physical distance between the two poles can vary significantly, with asylum seekers often relying on public transportation or private means (bicycle, electric scooter, etc.) to reach the workplace. As mentioned above, we also need to consider the presence of so-called “unproductive” reception facilities, located in highly depressed economic zones. Despite their setting, these facilities nonetheless possess intrinsic economic qualities. Other than being a source of profit for a series of service-provider actors, they also represent employment opportunities (albeit precarious ones) for the local workforce, such as social workers.

Another distinctive feature of the humanitarian labor regime concerns its spatio-temporality. Is it possible to find a spatial and temporal origin of this regime of raced social reproduction? In other words, is the space of reception the sole and unique zone where this regime is at play, or does we need to expand our horizons? Contemplating the concept of “logisticality” as it relates to the asylum system helps to shed light on the fact that the reception archipelago is not the final socio-spatial component of a coercive system governing life. This system has its roots in different historical periods and locations. For example, the humanitarian labor regime indirectly benefits from the reproductive labor carried out by women and societies prior to the arrival of asylum seekers in Europe (Rigo 2022). This regime is thus based on a sort of functional

ambiguity. On the one hand, asylum seekers are mainly thought of simply as bodies to be educated and trained, or as bodies not yet ready to work. On the other hand, these bodies in fact already possess an array of skills derived from past experience which enable them to be directly exploited.

To conclude this dense theoretical overview, I want to come back to the logistics of the humanitarian labor regime. Expanding on Harney and Moten (2013), who located the birth of modern logistics in the Atlantic Slave Trade, Niccolò Cuppini et al. (2015) contends that nowadays, logistics is still imbued with this racial logic, and it tends “to transform the logistics laborer into something like a drudge, an android, a working machine” (2015:122). This reflection does not apply exclusively to the logistics sector. Following recent studies on the topic (Altenried 2022; Andrijasevic et al. 2021; Bologna 2021; Cowen 2014; Into the Black Box 2021; Mezzadra and Neilson 2019; Tsing 2009), it is clear that a logistical rationality has transformed the overall paradigm of contemporary production. The “just-in-time” and “on-call” imperatives have heavily reshaped the pace and structure of production, for logistics is the way work is organized and assembled.

By taking seriously this reflection on the android and slave-like labor subjectivity pursued by a logistical rationality, a pivotal concern arises. What happens when the logistical rationality of the humanitarian labor regime is integrated and reinforced by the logistical transformation of production? Which kind of figures of labor are sought out in contexts where these two logistical realms meet? We can assert, in this regard, that the asylum seeker is indeed subjected to a compounded “logisticality,” resulting in a figure which is uniquely “unfree.” The “logistics of reproduction” integral to asylum, therefore, is a key analytical prism that accounts for the specificities of the humanitarian labor regime in relation to the reproduction of distinct figure of coerced labor.

3.4 WHY THE HUMANITARIAN LABOR REGIME NOW? THE RECEPTION FIX

Why prisons? Why now? Why for so many people—especially people of color? These are the crucial questions which Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007:6) attempts to answer in her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. The author considers the impressive growth of reception facilities and the simultaneous unprecedented rise of the carceral population which occurred in California during the 1980s. Expanding on a series of studies on the US Prison Industrial Complex (Davis 1995; Davis 2003; Hallett 2002), Gilmore contends that the mass incarceration of racialized and impoverished people since the 1980s remains incomprehensible without profound engagement with the systemic socio-economic changes, repressive juridical reforms and the working of specific racial-punitive ideologies germane to the sociocultural context in which they are situated.

Put simply, mass incarceration would have been unfeasible according to pre-existing legislation and the socio-economic order more broadly. Prison expansion was a structural measure, a *fix* (Harvey 2001), to radically restore the California economy and society more broadly: “prison is a partial geographical solution to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis. Crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists” (Gilmore 2007:26). During the 1970s, California entered an irreversible socio-economic crisis. The “welfare-warfare” industrial model (military-Keynesianism), based on a racial-social contract with a relative degree of social guarantees and services, went through a profound transformation and caused a systemic overabundance of unemployed, impoverished, and Black workers, as well as a surplus of formerly cultivated lands. Contrary to the previous socio-economic order, these surplus populations and lands needed to be “employed” and valorized differently in order to assure the reproduction and sustainability of society.

In sum, the California capitalist state was in need of creating new forms and models of accumulation. According to Gilmore, one has to locate “mass incarceration + prison expansion” within this epochal and systemic socio-economic transformation, with prison becoming a gravitational center of multiple, flourishing financial and racialized circuits of value: from prisons building, maintenance, and financial investments to the various activities for managing and reproducing the carceral population (jailers, basic services for prisoners, carceral state bureaucracy, etc.), to the unpaid labor of the carceral population. Most notably, this new socio-economic model was built and based on pre-existent racial inequalities, with Blacks, Latinxs and Indigenous people being the most affected from these structural adjustments.

In convincingly outlining that “punishment has to be conceptually severed from its seemingly indissoluble link with crime” (Davis 2003:85), Gilmore offers a counterintuitive understanding of “mass incarceration + prison expansion.” In other words, it would be inappropriate and misleading to simply affirm that criminal behaviors exceptionally increased in California in the 1980s. On the contrary, one has to consider, for instance, the implementation of a series of judicial reforms that contributed to the mass incarceration of Black and impoverished people. While before, these reforms a series of behaviors and conducts were considered legal (or, if illegal, punishments did not usually include prison), since the early 1980s things changed radically: from that point, crime was less about morality and more of a product of political, racial and economic societal structures.

Albeit the incommensurable diversity between the socio-economic context analyzed by Gilmore and the subject of this work, I believe her analytical framework can be useful to understand the conjunctural emergence of the humanitarian labor regime. As such, I propose to ask: Why the humanitarian labor regime? Why now? Why for some many people—especially non-white people?

As I have already argued in chapters 1, in the wake of the 2008 global crisis, European migration policy entered a new phase. Following Gilmore’s analytical framework, we might call

this phase of “mass refugification + reception expansion,” during which time undocumented non-white people on the move have been forced to apply for asylum, and were subsequently inserted into a booming “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021). In similar ways to prison expansion, therefore, it would be misleading to simply affirm that the number of asylum seekers boomed in Europe during the 2010s. One must also take into account the fact that asylum—or this concrete model of governance—emerged as the only possible legal channel for distinct population groups to obtain partial and subordinate forms of political recognition. Like crime in the case discussed above, asylum became less about morality and more a product of political, racial, and economic societal structures.

What is more, it is of pivotal importance to consider the profound and radical transformations that invested the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” (Novak 2021). In Italy, for instance, before the 2008-2011 period, there was no nationwide system of reception facilities. About 50 reception centers were operative in 2008, while 12,275 facilities were active in 2018. If 6,284 people were in reception centers in 2007, this number skyrocketed to 66,066 in 2014 and reached the maximum of 183,681 in 2017.⁵¹ This data needs to be read in counterintuitive ways, however. Indeed, even during the 1990s and early 2000s, Italy had received tens of thousands of asylum applications (Marchi 2024a); at this time, however, the institutional and governmental response was different. Some groups of asylum seekers were granted *ad hoc* documents allowing them to avoid this “humanitarian labyrinth” (see Chapter 1), while others freely and informally settled throughout the country (Petrovic 2021). After this period, due to a mixture of sociolegal and political transformations, “mass refugification + reception expansion” emerged as the new rationale of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure.” In the wake of the 2008 global crisis, however, it appeared that there was a need to manage migrants’

⁵¹ Data on the Italian reception system are taken from Commissione nazionale asilo [National Asylum Commission]. (2022), Ghizzi Gola (2015). Olivieri (2008).

bodies in a different and more pervasive manner. In Germany, things were similar. Even if, contrary to Italy, Germany already had a sort of nationwide reception system in light of its different migratory history, during the 2010s the reception system boomed significantly—especially in the wake of the 2015 “long summer of migration” (Kasperek and Scheel 2017). While in 2005 a total of 11,431 beds were available in reception facilities (Manns and Hecht 2005:6), in recent years this number increased to 398,585 (Asylumineurope 2021).

Overall, the “mass refugeeization + reception expansion” model can be regarded as the new “postcolonial asylum infrastructure” which has emerged in Europe in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. On the one hand, this model is based on a series of racial imperatives and rationalities which have long structured the management of non-white bodies across the European space (Davis and Isakjee 2018). On the other hand, it is also a model which is characterized by a series of novelties when compared to previous patterns of the governance of non-white migration in Europe. In the pages above, I have sketched out the distinctions of this model and the specific ways in which figures of coerced labor are reproduced. As discussed, the key to understanding this new paradigm regards the shift from the government of mobility to a broader, more invasive and coercive government of migrants’ life, instantiated by the logistics of asylum.

The main question, therefore, remains: *Why the Humanitarian Labor Regime now?* Following Gilmore (2007), it is necessary to read what has been variously termed as the migrant or refugee crisis against the grain of the systemic socio-economic transformations which began Europe in the wake of the 2008 crisis. Although there are important differences between European countries, the 2008 crisis heavily impacted the socio-economic equilibrium of the economies within the Eurozone. This led to the implementation of a series of measures aimed at favoring the further and profound flexibilization and precaritization of labor markets, with the aim of

encouraging neoliberal financial capital exigence to access forms of contingent, short-term and unguaranteed labor.

In analyzing the changing patterns in the governance of the population, Michel Foucault (1980) coined the notion of “apparatus” (*dispositif*) (see Introduction). According to the French philosopher, *dispositifs*, as infrastructures of government, evolve and mutate according to changing socio-economic and political conjunctures:

I understand by the term “apparatus” (*dispositif*) a sort of—shall we say—formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function (Foucault 1980:195, emphasis my own).

Indeed, what has been the “urgent need” faced by European economies in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis?

Various commentators and scholars have noted that the deregulation, flexibilization and “precaritization” of European labor markets has been a common trend which has encouraged the restructuring of accumulative processes in the name of the “just-in-time” neoliberal imperative. The humanitarian labor regime, from this perspective, emerged as an effective measure to manage and reproduce a new figure of labor suited to the further implementation of this growing flexibilization of European labor markets. Mouna Maroufi (2017), from this perspective, noted how what I have called the humanitarian labor regime in Germany has brought about an overall restructuring of the labor market:

the implemented reforms for refugees’ labor market integration reproduce general tendencies in the regulation of labor markets, such as the activation and flexibilization of labor. In a period of labor regulation based on flexible accumulation, attempts to liberalize refugee integration policies might thereby be implemented in a way that contribute to a further segmentation and precarization of the labor market (Maroufi 2017:16).

As we will see in the page below, the labor dynamics at Interporto Bologna reveal the disruptive role played by the humanitarian labor regime in favoring the flexibilization and (racial) segmentation of labor. During the 2011-2014 period, Northern African migrants organized and managed to gain a certain degree of bargaining power to the point that they obtained a series of improvements, such as the stabilization of their contracts. It is necessary to mention that these groups of migrants were not asylum seekers; rather, many of them arrived in Italy during the 2000s with other kind of visas (e.g. study, family reunification, work). Although initially these kinds of visas were limited in duration (with the possibility for extension), they did not imply the logistical reorganization of life as in the “mass refugeeization + reception expansion” model. In other words, migrants might have deliberately settled in Bologna because of the presence of a series of social networks already present in the area, which in turn provided an array of essential resources for support and survival (e.g. housing, social connection, employment opportunities, etc.).

The arrival of the asylum seeker, subjected to such coercive and destructive dynamics, brought about a comprehensive racial segmentation and flexibilization of labor at Interporto. Since 2015, reception has functioned as a sort of informal and scattered dormitory infrastructure matching the need of Interporto’s management for a contingent and disposable labor force to replace potentially riotous (migrant) workers who had fought to take back their bargaining power. It would be inappropriate, however, to affirm that the overall racial segmentation and flexibilization of labor at Interporto was caused by the making and reproduction of a simple “racialized surplus population” (Farris 2018). This is not sufficient. Rather, as I argued above, we need to bring back into the framework the foundational role played by the humanitarian labor regime in shaping distinct figures and dynamics of disposable and coercible labor.

From this perspective, Gemma Bird and Dave Schimd (2021), drawing from Harvey (2001) and Gilmore (2007), advanced the notion of the “migration fix.” They contend that:

state and international actors, with the conscious and unconscious support of the “humanitarian industrial complex,” mobilize a system of bordering and encampment to manage the uneven effects of capitalist development, most notably by regulating the access of surplus populations to local labor markets. [...] the “migration fix” does not operate through a straightforward logic of spatial expansion but rather deploys an array of bordering, channeling and containment practices to regulate surplus populations and create opportunities for profit-extraction. [...] the rationale of the “migration fix” is not purely economic [...] Rather, it responds to a broader range of political and social imperatives by managing various surpluses in the support of domestic interests and nativist political projects (Bird, Schmid 2021:10).

Expanding on this framework, I suggest the term of “reception fix” in order to emphasize the peculiar—racial and coercive—reproductive function of the humanitarian labor regime. In other words, I posit that although the term “migration fix” provides important theoretical insights, the notion remains quite vague in relation to the types of surplus populations and specific forms of coercion which are pursued and ensured (respectively) by the humanitarian labor regime.

The idea of “migration fix” provides a general theory that might be applied to different geographical and historical contexts where an array of actors, procedures, spaces and technology join in a unique infrastructure of government to encourage the making of a migrant surplus population. The concept of the “reception fix” thus aims to be a specific tool that explains the development of a unique infrastructure for managing migrants’ lives during the 2010s, particularly in response to the disruptions caused by the 2008 global crisis.

4. The humanitarian labor regime “hits the ground.”

4.1 GERMANY AND ITALY: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Germany and Italy can be regarded as two distinct (yet not opposite) declinations of the humanitarian labor regime. Even if the current project is not intended to be strictly comparative, it partly explores differences and similarities in the functioning of this European spatio-racial politics of labor, especially in relation to changing asylum policy and different socio-territorial contexts. Although each country has developed peculiar strategies to exploit those forced to apply for asylum during the 2010s, the ethnographic material collected during the span of my research demonstrates a structural continuity concerning the working of the humanitarian labor regime in both countries. Before introducing ethnographic data, however, I will schematically trace an overview on the changing asylum policy over the last decades in both countries.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, people seeking asylum, mainly from Central Eastern Europe, were not allowed to work in with Germany (Koser 2007). Since the late 1990s, this ban has been partially and selectively overcome, with specific groups of asylum seekers (i.e. those who received asylum status) being granted the right to work, but only after 15 months of living

permanently within the national territory.⁵² Historically speaking, labor migration policy and asylum policy in Germany were kept separated and treated as highly distinct domains, with different legislations, procedures, and discourses germane to each. An emblematic case of labor migration policy in Germany is the “guest worker” system: From the 1950s until the early 1970s, in a moment of expansion and consolidation of the Fordist model, West Germany attracted migrant workers from Southern Europe, as well as from Turkey and Morocco, with a turn-over policy aimed at preventing migrant communities from settling permanently in the country (Haug, Ruhl 2008).

With the end of the “guest worker” system, labor migration policy progressively shifted towards the recruitment of highly qualified non-European workers, while the expansion of the EU to include Eastern European countries favored the mass-scale employment of temporary workers in “low skilled” sectors, such as agriculture, butchery, construction, and logistics (Birke and Bluhm 2020; Birke 2022). In recent years, the German politics of working visas, in line with other European countries, has been driven by a highly restrictive and selective logic: as a result, the vast majority of non-white immigrants has been forced to apply to asylum upon irregular entry in the country (as we have seen in Chapter 1).

From between 2012-2014, however, a series of critical reforms have eased access to labor market for asylum seekers (Refugee Review 2017). This radical shift was favored, among others, by increasing pressure from employer associations, which contributed to promote a new discourse on asylum. Given the endemic labor shortage afflicting Germany, employer associations and policy makers started to consider asylum seekers as an essential workforce to be selectively employed for the purposes of assuring the sustainability of German economy and society more broadly. In the wake of the 2015 “long summer of migration” (Kasperek, Scheel

⁵² For an overview on the recent changes in asylum and migration policy in Germany, see Bergfeld (2017), OECD (2017), Refugee Review (2017), Schwenken (2021).

2017), therefore, asylum seekers were simultaneously framed in terms of “people in need” *and* a population (potentially) rich in professional skills (Altenried et al. 2018).

Overall, during the 2010s a different asylum infrastructure began to develop in Germany than had previously been in place. While according to previous legal and political arrangements asylum seekers were summarily excluded from the labor market, in recent years their economic integration became not only possible, but also compulsory. Asylum, in other words, became the pivotal infrastructure for disciplining, reproducing, and integrating a new “figure of labor” (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) within specific local niches of the German labor market (Etzold 2017; Maroufi 2017). Based on a series of combined factors (e.g. country of origin and professional skills), the “unfree activation” (Maroufi 2022) of asylum seekers within the German labor market has been organized according to a complex system aimed at dividing between “deserving applicants” and “undeserving ones.” Therefore,

persons assumed to have the highest chance for legal residency and most promising and proximate labor market potential are granted more resources than others who are already disadvantaged due to their class, gender, race, and nationality (Maroufi 2022:6).

Accordingly, selected group of asylum seekers are able to *and* obligated to access a series of educational and professional resources, such as language and vocational schools, as well as internships and job positions. I explicitly say “able to” *and* “obligated to” because those who have access to these resources are obliged by law to choose among an array of educational or professional opportunities in order not to lose an array of social and political benefits, such as legal residency or financial support by state authorities (Maroufi 2017, 2022). In contrast, those groups of “underserving” asylum seekers (e.g. those coming from “safe country of origin”) are variously excluded from these resources, and usually rely on informal networks to find (informal) employment (Etzold 2017; see below).

Some described this new German model of “unfree activation” (Maroufi 2022), where asylum and labor policy were increasingly intertwined, in terms of a “logistical fantasy” (Altenried et al. 2018). In other words, the seeking asylum population has become the target of a series of practices and procedures aimed at logistically mediating between “demand and supply” of workforce in the German labor market. This fantasy, however, could be only partially satisfied. Indeed, one has to consider that this new German model implied the coordination and integration of a panoply of actors, such as local, regional, national institutions, employment agencies, employer associations, education projects, civil society organizations, each one possessing distinct, and sometimes diverging, rationalities and temporalities. Consider, for instance, the long-lasting and uncertain temporality of an asylum application, on the one hand, and the urgent and immediate need for a workforce in sectors with labor shortages. This is also accompanied by a lack of financial resources of state administrations which, in some cases, might obstruct the harmonic integration between the different components of this model (Maroufi 2017). In addition, it is of pivotal importance to not lose sight of the acts and moments of infra-political survival enacted by migrants which silently contribute to the sabotage of the machine.

Although it has a different history of migration and (consequently) a distinct migration policy, Italy shares similar traits to Germany in the 2010s. During the 1990s and early 2000s, asylum and migration labor policy were considered to be highly separated domains.⁵³ The government of migrant labor was mainly regulated through a restrictive system of working visas and through a politics of amnesty. Given the significant number of undocumented migrants, mainly from Eastern Europe, present in the national territory, *ad hoc* legal measures favored the legalization of undocumented individuals, granting them access to the labor market. Asylum seekers were allowed to work only in the case of a positive response to their asylum application. At the same time, it is pivotal to emphasize that a politics of amnesty was applied

⁵³ For an overview on the history of asylum and migration policy in Italy, see Colucci (2018), Ghizzi-Gola (2015), Hein (2010), Petrovic (2021), Rigo, Caprioglio (2021).

towards specific groups of asylum seekers. Emblematic of this tendency is the ambivalent management of the thousands of Albanian citizens who reached, without any kind of visa, the Apulian shores in Southern Italy in August 1991 (Albahari 2015). While some were repatriated, around 20,000 remained in Italy and applied for asylum. Although they did not meet the selective parameters to obtain asylum status, they were granted an *ad hoc* humanitarian document allowing them access to the labor market (Petrovic 2021). Moreover, some of these people freely settle throughout the country, partly following networks of acquaintances who already lived there.

The government of migration in Italy changed drastically in the wake of the 2008 global crisis (Caprioglio and Rigo 2021). Hit by the most dramatic socio-economic crisis since World War II (Bastasin and Toniolo 2020), Italy heavily curtailed the already restrictive availability of the working visa, as well as of other kind of visas (e.g. family reunification, student visa, etc.). All those entering as undocumented migrants—via the Mediterranean Sea and via the Balkan route—were forced to apply for asylum. Contrary to previous socio-political conjunctures, however, the “refugification” of undocumented people was not met with a politics of amnesty for those with no chance to obtain refugee status. Neither were these people able to choose where to settle and go, but they were logistically inserted within a growing “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021). Before the 2008-2011 period, indeed only a negligible percentage of asylum seekers entered the few facilities scattered around the country; the majority of them had relative freedom to settle throughout the country. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, however, asylum seekers were automatically moved into a booming nation-wide reception system.

Asylum was not only the unique infrastructure for governing African and Middle East migration in Italy. In ways similar to Germany, it also went through a series of radical transformations if compared with previous conjunctures. However, unlike Germany, Italy did not see the convergence and integration of asylum and labor policies. Although in Italy asylum

seekers are allowed to work after sixty days from the moment they present their asylum application, there are no legal obligations to work or to undertake specific educational or professional pathways. Instead, in Italy, the figure of the “asylum seeker” has mainly remained anchored to a moral horizon. While in Germany a series of economic and political interests contributed to the integration of asylum with labor policies, and the epistemic re-signification of these categories—both a person in need (the moral dimension) and a potential worker (the economic dimension)—in Italy, things went differently.

This does not mean that asylum seekers’ labor integration is not considered by asylum institutions, policymakers, and NGOs as a critical goal of reception policy in Italy (Africa e Mediterraneo 2018; Naga 2021). From this perspective, a series of non-compulsory policies have been implemented with the aim of favoring asylum seekers’ integration into the labor market through unpaid and voluntary jobs, as showed by recent research on the topic (Di Cecco 2019; Martorano 2023). The material resources invested in these programs, however, were partial and fragmented, with entire territories excluded from these measures. Only in specific areas of the country, like Bologna (see below), a series of institutional partnerships between asylum offices and employers have been implemented.

Overall, since around 2008-2011 in Italy, there has been a peculiar combination, or absence, of elements linking migration and labor policies. On the one hand, the release of working visa has become more and more restrictive and selective. On the other hand, illegalized migrants have been forced to apply to asylum, which, as we have seen, emerged as a different kind of infrastructure when compared with previous moments in the national context. A model I framed in the term of “mass refugification + reception expansion.” As a consequence of this “refugification,” migration was mainly debated in moral terms of (in)hospitality, while migrant labor exploitation cyclically reappeared in public debates in terms of a humanitarian emergency; namely, as a phenomenon to be tackled with exceptional measures, without considering the repressive and punitive paradigm of asylum and migration policy itself (Rigo and Dines 2015).

However, if labor (policy) has disappeared from this level of discourse (Caprioglio and Rigo 2021), the same cannot be said if one considers the mass-scale exploitation of asylum seekers, which has been denounced by a series of journalistic investigations and the literature on the topic (Avallone et al. 2021; Cagioni 2021; Mangano 2020; Marchi 2022; Omizzolo 2020; Perrotta et al. 2021). Asylum has *de facto* favored an overall racial restructuring of the labor market with an overall tendency towards flexibilization. Interestingly, the Italian labor market has been reconfigured through an infrastructure of government officially unrelated to labor. That is why, I contend, the humanitarian labor regime lens is an important theoretical tool to analyze and reflect on the decisive impact of asylum on the labor market, and vice versa.

Therefore, one might argue that in Italy, the humanitarian labor regime mainly operated through informal means, namely without official agreements and policy linking “the field of asylum” and the “field of labor” (Etzold 2017), like in the German case. However, this does not mean that the generalized and mass-scale exploitation of asylum seekers (and the consequent restructuring of the labor market more broadly) needs to be considered as a sort of causal accident or an unintended outcome. On the contrary, following Michel Foucault’s insights on the structural discrepancies between institutional discourses and material outcomes (discussed in Chapter 1), I see the systemic exploitation of asylum seekers as an instrumental component of the humanitarian labor regime. While in Germany, labor was formally and institutionally integrated within the new discourse of asylum, in Italy labor remained discursively marginal but materially and instrumentally central.

Clearly, this picture is deliberately schematic. As I discuss in the rest of this chapter, informal forms of exploitation and recruitment are generalized in Berlin, while in Bologna a significant amount of asylum seekers are employed through formal “internship programs.” Although there are differences between the German and the Italian declinations of the humanitarian labor regime, there are also substantial similarities which emerge from an analysis of my ethnographic

material. As I have already anticipated in the introduction, and as I will continue to argue, I understand the emergence of the humanitarian labor regime as a European phenomenon linked to the socio-economic effects provoked by the 2008 global crisis. At the same time, one needs to ethnographically explore the complex modalities through which socio-economic, political and territorial differences give rise to distinct and site-specific declinations of this distinct spatio-racial politics of labor.

4.2 VERONA: DEEP NORTH, DEEP SOUTH

If you love someone bring them to Verona...because Verona is the city of love! Shakespeare had already set here his Romeo and Juliet drama, the most famous and cherished love story of all times. The star-crossed lovers' places – Juliet's House with the famous balcony, Juliet's tomb and Romeo's House – are among the must-see destinations today.⁵⁴

“Verona, the city of love!” I have lost count of the times I heard this slogan when talking with foreign friends and acquaintances. As a major tourist destination, in recent decades Verona has invested significantly in branding. Romeo and Juliet's love affair, ancient monuments and ruins such as the Arena of Verona and the Roman theatre, and prestigious wines such as the Amarone, produced in the nearby Valpolicella Valley, are all but some of the most popular attractions and experiences tourists want while visiting Verona.

Born in a small town in the southern of the Verona province, I often replied that Verona is actually the city of hatred. Since the early 1990s, the city has been governed by right-wing coalitions in strict connections with neo-fascist groups, ultra-conservative Catholic associations, local media and entrepreneurs. Given the subsequent emergence of similarly informal and ambiguous coalitions of power on a national level, which some have intriguingly referred to as a “*veronesizzazione della politica italiana* [the Verona-ization of Italian politics],” Verona has become an interesting laboratory for grasping a broader tendency where neoliberalism, racism

⁵⁴ “Tourism Verona” [*Turismo Verona*]. <http://www.turismoverona.eu>.

and conservatism go hand in hand (Dal Medico 2004). Racist and neo-fascist aggressions are ordinary in Verona, as documented by independent reports which mapped the countless acts of a micro-war against racialized minorities, Roma people, unhoused people, and anti-fascist groups over the last three decades.⁵⁵ One of the most emblematic episodes of this was the brutal (and lethal) beating of Nicola Tommasoli by a group of five neo-fascists on the night of 30th April 2008 (Adami and Veronesi 2021).

Aggressions often occur in the silence and illusory calm of the countryside. During my fieldwork, I was informed by an asylum lawyer, Laura, about ordinary racist violence against black asylum seekers living in the southeast of the Verona province. Asylum seekers were repeatedly beaten by unidentified people in isolated countryside streets while cycling back to their reception centers after exhaustive shifts working in the fields. Hatred against blacks and other racialized minorities, which is often the fuel of political discourses and campaigns, clashes with the fact that entire economic sectors are largely dependent on these people, who are exploited twice: once in the workplace, and again for political purposes. In recent years, the opening of reception centers in small municipalities epitomized the clash between racist political discourses and the perpetual need of a racialized workforce. In the Verona province, for instance, some local municipalities led by right-wing coalitions publicly opposed the presence of asylum seekers in their territory.⁵⁶ Some of these campaigns proved successful, with the relocation of asylum seekers to other areas of the province.

Laura lived in one of these municipalities, and insisted on the double function of racism. On the one hand, in fact, the mayor of that small town had openly campaigned for the expulsion and relocation of a group of asylum seekers. On the other hand, he privately complained to Laura

⁵⁵ <http://www.centrodocumentazionebertani.org/pubblicazioni-e-biblioteca/>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.larena.it/territorio-veronese/grande-verona/sprar-il-comune-non-ci-sta-non-vogliamo-altri-profughi-1.5448097>.

when he discovered that asylum seekers were moved to a reception center far more than fifty kilometers away:

The mayor supported the relocation to gain consensus among the local population. He thought that asylum seekers would have been moved to a nearby municipality, as they all worked for agricultural companies in his municipality. After the relocation, some companies had a labor shortage and the mayor called me asking to relocate the asylum seekers closer to his municipality.⁵⁷

Laura had no official authority to respond to those requests, and those companies had to find new laborers as a substitute for the asylum seekers. Other than revealing, once again, the arbitrary nature of asylum logistics, this episode directly highlights the capitalization of asylum by local economies (Etzold 2017).

When moved to the last spatial knot of the “reception supply chain” (Vianelli 2021), asylum seekers’ everyday life is often spent traveling in between the reception facility and the workplace (Marchi 2022). If you are driving in the south of the Verona province at sunset, you might encounter several migrants cycling back to their reception centers following their daily shifts. Along with part of the Mantova, Ferrara and Rovigo provinces, this part of the province forms an extended and critical agricultural basin within the Po Valley region. Driving across this area, you run into a loop made of fields, greenhouses, artificial canals, spaces for the intensive rearing of livestock, small, rural villages, and industrial areas filled with abandoned warehouses. This is my childhood landscape: a landscape which, at first sight, resembles and reminds one of those places where time seems to have stopped. For years, I saw it as a peaceful rural zone where peasants devoted their lives to land. The reality is far more complex.

⁵⁷ Laura, Interview with Author, July 12, 2021, Verona, my translation from Italian.

Over the last few decades, beyond the façade of immutableness, the socio-economic scenario has changed profoundly. Intensive farming and livestock rearing have developed considerably at the expense of small businesses and have become more and more dependent on (subcontracted) migrant labor (Piro and Sacchetto, 2021). Abandoned and isolated houses were converted into reception facilities, which in addition to reproducing dynamics of socio-spatial confinement also encouraged the channeling of asylum seekers into the farming industry.

One of these reception centers is a two-story house in the middle of the countryside, where plantations fade into the horizon. When I arrived there, on a bright summer afternoon, I met with Ousmane, a twenty-five-year-old from Senegal who spoke fluent Italian. He told me that in the house lived about twenty-five people, mainly from Sub-Saharan countries: Mali, Gambia, The Republic of Guinea, and Nigeria. He shared his room with three other people. Other than Franca, the social worker who introduced me to Ousmane, no one seemed present in the center. “They are all working,” he told me, “I am cooking some food for them, so when they will be here, they will find already something to eat.”⁵⁸ The cooperative, which manages several reception centers in Italy, provides food every day, but Ousmane prefers to cook. “The food they bring is very bad, when I have time, like today, I prefer to do it by myself”.⁵⁹ He was cooking a Senegalese dish with rice, vegetables, and meat in the backyard of the house.

Before being transferred to Verona, Ousmane lived for about one year and a half in an “emergency reception center” in Cona, a small village in the province of Venice. This center, now closed, opened in 2015 during what mainstream media and institutions framed as “the refugee crisis,” and hosted up to 1500 people during arrival peaks. A former military barrack, it became one of the critical regional hubs for the management of asylum seekers. Ousmane originally arrived in Bari at the beginning of 2016, and after one day was transferred to Cona, along with many other migrants via a long bus journey. There, he was accommodated in huge

⁵⁸ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

⁵⁹ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

military tents, filled with only bunk beds and shared with hundreds of migrants. Several reports denounced the inhumane conditions of the center, with migrants effectively living in complete isolation from the outside.⁶⁰ A special badge was issued for asylum seekers, and only social workers were allowed to enter this former military barrack. Although migrants were free to move in and out, Ousmane told me they preferred to remain inside because of the local community's openly racist behaviors:

In Cona it was a horrible experience, I lived for one year and a half in a huge military tent with more than 300 migrants, in total there were more than 1500 people. Everyday fights amongst migrants, people from Nigeria, Mali, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Senegal all together. If you live with people who do not speak your language and are not from your country there are a lot of misunderstandings, always fights [...] During the wintertime it was impossible to sleep because of the weather, it was too cold! When it was raining water was leaking inside, it was a horrible experience. A woman from Ivory Coast died because of the cold!⁶¹ [...] We didn't want to stay there, we made a big protest because we wanted to leave the camp, we were 500 people protesting and demanding to leave the camp. We organized a long march to Prefettura Venice to ask to leave the camp [...] Many friends I knew in Cona went to Germany, France, Spain... but I decided to stay. [...] There we just spent our days sleeping and resting, there was nothing to do. It was dangerous for us to go outside the camp because the people outside were very bad and racist with us... We saw many migrants that while cycling were run off by cars of Italian people, it was dangerous for us to go outside so we spent all day sleeping and resting inside the tents. [...] The only thing you could do was doing voluntary job in the camp, helping with the food and some other stuff like this.⁶²

⁶⁰ At the link <https://www.meltingpot.org/tag/cona-ve/> it is possible to find a series of articles about the Cona "emergency reception center."

⁶¹ Sandrine Bakayoko, 25-years-old, died on 2nd January 2017 for a sudden illness while in the Cona "emergency reception center," see <https://www.meltingpot.org/2017/01/nel-centro-di-cona-ve-scoppia-la-rivolta-dopo-la-morte-di-una-giovane-ivoriana/>.

⁶² Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

In the aftermath of the protest, a fifty-kilometers march which was organized in November 2017, during which migrants traveled from Cona to the *Prefettura*⁶³ in Venice, hundreds of asylum seekers were relocated across the Veneto region (Camilli 2017). When I asked Ousmane if he decided to come to Verona, he replied that: “No, I didn’t decide, they decided. We went to *Prefettura* in Venice, and there I then discovered that they were sending me to Verona, other people I knew were sent to Padova and Vicenza”.⁶⁴ Together with other migrants, he was transferred by bus to the *Prefettura* in Verona and once there, migrants were randomly distributed to different reception facilities.

Right after his arrival in the reception center where we met, Ousmane started to look for a job. Having arrived in the middle of an extended agricultural basin, he started to cycle around in search for work: “I was going with the bike around the center, when I saw people working in the fields I asked for job, it was easy to find it. After some days I met an Italian lady and she offered me to work for her through an employment agency.”⁶⁵ Within a few days, Ousmane found a job. From Monday to Saturday, he worked during the daytime in fields, and overnight in intensive animal farming, for a total of 13 hours per day (78 hours per week). He worked for that agency more than two years. As a subcontracted worker, he changed workplaces almost every day. Out of thirty migrant workers, about 10 were asylum seekers from his center, while others were mainly from Eastern Europe, like Romania and Poland.

Every late afternoon, Ousmane received a phone call or message from the agency: “If the farm was close by we were going by bike, otherwise someone came to take us with the car and brought us to the farm...Everyday, we did something different, grapes, kiwi, melons, salads, it depends on the day and on the place the agency was sending us.”⁶⁶ At the end of the 9-hour shift,

⁶³ Prefettura is the provincially-decentralized office of the Interior Ministry which is in charge of coordinating the distribution of asylum seekers among reception facilities, which are managed by social cooperatives and private companies.

⁶⁴ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

⁶⁵ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

⁶⁶ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

at around 6 p.m., he went back to the reception center to get some food and have some rest. At 9 p.m. he would again prepare to go work at a chicken or turkey farm. At that time, he did not have time to prepare his own food, and eating the meals provided by the cooperative was the only possible choice. The night shift was from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Ousmane, with few other asylum seekers, was responsible for picking chickens and turkeys from the ground and loading them into trucks. For two years, this was Ousmane's routine, spent in between the reception center and the workplace:

For instance, they call you on Sunday and told you that on Monday you work in the fields...from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a one-hour break, 9 hours...then chickens overnight, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m...I worked liked this for 2 years. After the night shift I was home around 3 a.m., I slept 3 hours and then it was already time to wake up for working in the fields. Every day it was like this, except Sunday.⁶⁷

All twenty-five asylum seekers, Ousmane told me, worked in the agriculture sector, mainly employed as subcontracted workers or without contracts.

He was paid 5 euros per hour, at least according to the cooperative. But Ousmane's monthly earning was about 1200 or 1300 euros, which corresponds to about 4 euros per hour.⁶⁸ "The problem is that the payroll was always fake. They gave me 1000 euros cash and 200 euros in the official payroll. I complained several times with the lady at the cooperative, but she said that they have been working this way for years and they are not going to change it because of me."⁶⁹ After 2 years, he found a job in a farm where he used to work from time to time with the agency. He worked as a kiwi-picker, with a "real contract" and a payment of 7.5 euros per hour, 8 hours a day. In the farm, he worked along with three other asylum seekers and two workers from

⁶⁷ Ousmane, Interview with Author, August 31, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

⁶⁸ Note that according to the law, the minimum wage in the agriculture sector in the province of Verona is 7.5 EUR per hour; after 39 hours per week, payment should increase and counts as "extraordinary work."

⁶⁹ Interview, August 31, 2021, Verona, my translation from the Italian.

Romania. At the time of our meeting, Ousmane was on a break as the kiwi season had ended, and was waiting to sign a new contract for the same farmer the coming September. In the meantime, he worked for two months for a packing company, employed through an employment agency that offered one-week contracts. He told me that other workers, mainly from Italy and Morocco, were very bossy with him and the two other black colleagues; he thus decided to quit and wait in the “camp” for the start of the kiwi season.

Ousmane’s employment conditions, similar to that of many other asylum seekers I met during fieldwork in Verona, epitomize also the concept of “grey labor.” According to Giorgio, the unionist we met in Chapter 1, nowadays “grey labor” in Verona is systemic and structural:

Grey labor is the perfect solution for the company. For example, the company makes an official contract that declares 15 hours per week, but in reality, the worker works at least 50 hours. In this way it is almost impossible to unmask the scam. If you do not have any contract (“black labor”), you are at risk of financial and administrative sanctions, but if you have a fake contract, it is almost impossible to demonstrate that you are overworking. [...] Consider that in Verona there are more than 15,000 agricultural companies and only three inspectors who effect job controls, it is an institutional system of exploitation. [...] Over the last years I met with hundreds of asylum seekers who work in agriculture here in Verona; they all work 50, 60, 70 hours per week, but their payroll declares only a marginal percentage of these hours. The norm here is “grey labor,” it is a true rarity to meet migrants with “real” contracts.⁷⁰

As noted by Giorgio, “grey labor” is the “perfect solution” for companies, and to a certain extent it can be compared to “black labor.” On the one hand, “grey labor” implies and reproduces informal circuits of values which, far from being marginal and obsolete, are constitutive of contemporary political economic landscapes (Routh and Borghi 2016). On the other hand, it excludes workers from any form of social benefits and contributes to their broader socio-

⁷⁰ Giorgio, Interview with Author, 21 June, 2021, Verona. My translation from Italian.

economic marginalization. For instance, without an official and long-term job contract, one can rarely access the housing market, as a regular paycheck and stable working conditions is a formal prerequisite for acquiring housing. It goes without saying that the housing segregation of racialized communities is not only pursued through formal channels. As noted by various researchers, a politics of racial discrimination also effectively excludes black communities from access to housing conditions (FRA 2023; Walker 2023).

The issue of “grey labor” and of the short duration of job contracts, however, is more intricate for asylum seekers. While the asylum process is pending—for Ousmane, the process lasted about 5 years— asylum seekers are granted a provisional document (*cedolino*) which is issued by the *Questura*⁷¹ and lasts a maximum of six months. The *Questura* often grants a *cedolino* for approximately two or three months, and the asylum seeker *de facto* becomes the perfect contingent workforce. Job contracts, in fact, cannot exceed the duration of the residency document. “It’s a dog chasing its tail,” Giorgio told me, “when asylum seekers go to the *Questura* to renew their *cedolino*, the officers also look at their job contracts, which last one or two months, largely because their previous *cedolino* lasted 2 months. The *Questura* consequently issues a two-month *cedolino*, because they say that the asylum seeker has only a two-month contract and does not need a longer document.”⁷² This bureaucratic labyrinth comprised by the rules of asylum and labor creates a perfect trap that condemns asylum seekers to be employed accordingly to the need of the companies, which use the *cedolino* as the perfect formal excuse to avoid making longer and more guaranteed contracts.

Ousmane’s trajectory of experiences as a worker since his arrival in Verona aptly summarizes the informal, yet structural and systemic intertwinement between the “field of asylum” and the “field of labor” (Etzold 2017). In particular, his case shows that the “reception supply chain”

⁷¹ *Questura* is the provincially-decentralized office of the Interior Ministry which is in charge of managing the issuing of residency documents for foreign citizens.

⁷² Interview, June 21, 2021, 21.06. 21, Verona, my translation from Italian.

(Vianelli 2021) embodies a socio-spatial infrastructure which assures the capture and the making of contingent, disposable and coerced labor according to the need of distinct industries. Asylum seekers arbitrarily and logistically moved to reception facilities scattered across that agriculture enclave spend their everyday in between the workplace and their “camp”, which *de facto* resembles an informal dormitory for migrant workers subjected to a distinct regime of social reproduction.

The ethnographic insights presented above foreground what I would term a “proximity factor” in the functioning of the humanitarian labor regime. As we have seen, Ousmane was first moved to Cona, where he remained for one year and a half, and then he was transferred to a reception center in the southern east of the Verona province. Once moved to this critical agricultural enclave, he immediately found a job in the agriculture sector. What would have happened if, instead of Cona and Verona, Ousmane was moved to and warehoused in a reception center located in a territory with a different economic landscape? What if, for instance, Ousmane would have been moved to Bologna, where Interporto, an extended logistics site, systemically recruits asylum seekers into their contingent workforce?

4.3 BOLOGNA: SLAVES IN THE FREEST CITY IN THE WORLD?⁷³

4.3.1 LOGISTICAL EXPLOITATION

The quality of work is the overarching principle to be pursued through parallel and complementary actions by each party involved, in the common understanding that quality creates value, both economically and socially, as well as personally for the worker. The quality of work represents, at the same time, a useful and fundamental tool for stemming discriminatory phenomena, of labor exploitation and *caporalato*, as well as to prevent the possible entrenchment of mafia or criminal enterprises.⁷⁴

⁷³ This expression, “Schiavi nella città più libera del mondo”, is taken from a collective music album released in 1982 by a series of Punk bands active in the area of Bologna (see Carroli 2022).

⁷⁴ Carta Metropolitana per la Logistica Etica, 2022, my translation from Italian.

The excerpt above is taken from the *Carta Metropolitana per la Logistica Etica* (The Metropolitan Document for Ethical Logistics; hereinafter CMLE), a document released on January 27, 2022 by various local institutions in Bologna with the aim of promoting an “ethical” approach to the logistics sector. The signatories included the municipality, the Chamber of Commerce, the Prefettura, Cgil, Cisl, and Uil (the three main Italian unions), Interporto Bologna Inc., Marconi Airport, and the National Labor Inspectorate (INL). But what does it actually mean to have an “ethical” approach to logistics? According to the document, which does not oblige any party involved to institute particular practices, it means adopting a series of principles for assuring the well-being of “workers, collectives, and the environment” (CMLE, p. 3). The document also suggests that the logistics sector can be a model for sustainable development across industries and the society more broadly.

In a public conference at the *Prefettura* of Bologna, Alessandro Alberani, responsible for coordinating the “ethical logistics” project, may have inadvertently disclosed its underlying goal: the neutralization of workers’ strikes and the subsequent stabilization of logistics production at Interporto Bologna, one of the most critical intermodal centers of Northern Italy. Specifically, Alberani declared that they aim to include “the logistics sector under Law 146, which would mean longer and more complex procedures for calling strikes,” with the aim to “prevent blockades by warehouse workers, the majority of them are [who] are migrants and asylum seekers.”⁷⁵ In contemporary Bologna, a city with a legacy of anti-fascism and robust anti-establishment subculture, public discourses and practices in the name of inclusion, equality and justice are often difficult to grasp for what they really are. As I discuss in the next section, social cooperatives, which in Bologna institutionally symbolize a moral or virtuous approach to the economy, are deeply integrated with neoliberal extractive practices, disguised as “win-win”

⁷⁵ “Il silenzio etico: Migranti, logistica e amministrazione comunale. - Coordinamento Migranti” (Ethical Silence: Migrants, Logistics, and Municipal Administration – Coordination of Migrants), <https://www.coordinamentomigranti.org/2022/06/19/il-silenzio-etico-migranti-logistica-e-amministrazione-comunale/>. My translation from the Italian.

for both workers and employers. But what does working at Interporto really look like? Is it humane, sustainable, or even gratifying working there, as claimed by the “ethical logistics” document?

Imagine you are driving with your car in the northern outskirts of Bologna. The urban landscape, characterized by boulevards and grand facades, new transportation infrastructure and modern buildings, progressively turns into a repetitive pattern of cultivated lands and tiny, antiquated villages. Some ten kilometers north of the city, when you are already accustomed to this rural landscape, you encounter a vast expanse made by hundreds of warehouses, perpetually crossed by trucks, vans and trains transporting goods of every kind. You have now arrived at Interporto Bologna, a critical intermodal center which has acquired strategic importance as the evolution of logistics has increasingly changed the production paradigm (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018; Cowen 2014; *Into the Black Box* 2022). More than 130 companies have their branches there, with more than 5000 laborers, mainly subcontracted workers and migrants, allowing this logistical city to operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (Grappi 2021; Zic 2021).

While you are driving across this logistical city, you notice a peculiar combination of elements. First, the landscape seems to remind one of a dystopian and aseptic future. Streets have no names, but rather numbers (A1, A2, etc.), and glossy delivery vans are parked outside warehouses. While you may know that thousands of workers are working inside, few traces of human suffering are visible. In addition, you notice junk from old trucks, drivers eating in run-down restaurants, and workers slowly making their way towards their workplaces with shabby bicycles or electric scooters. This juxtaposition of sterile efficiency and leisurely disrepair vividly illustrates the constitutive heterogeneity of contemporary capitalism.

During my fieldwork, I slowly discovered that the many workers who crossed the orderly streets of Interporto, equipped-with shabby bikes or electric scooters, were asylum seekers residing in the several reception centers scattered around the city of Bologna and Ferrara.

Nowadays, the functionality of Interporto would be simply unthinkable without the humanitarian labor regime. Every day, and in most of the cases every night, hundreds of asylum seekers leave their reception facility to reach some of the several warehouses at Interporto to work as porters. Located twelve kilometers from Bologna and forty-two kilometers from Ferrara, the commute might take more than two hours. Asylum seekers often rely on public transportation or reach Interporto by bike or scooter, a journey which, in some dramatic instances, has proved to be lethal. Given the scarcity of public transportation routes, asylum seekers arrive in advance with ample time, and wait up to two hours at the end of their shift to catch the first public vehicle to return to their reception center.

Recruitment methods vary because there are no formal agreements between reception cooperatives and employment agencies. In many cases, asylum seekers contact employment agencies by word-of-mouth to obtain a short-term contract (as discussed above, in the case of workers in Verona). During my fieldwork, I also discovered that reception cooperatives entertain an unofficial connection with employment agencies, with some social workers becoming informal intermediaries between asylum seekers and opportunities for jobs. Contracts can last from a single day up to a couple of weeks, and can be renewed according to the needs of the company.

As I did my fieldwork at Interporto during the Christmas holidays, I noticed how employers modulated their employment practices. Given the predictable peak of production during Christmastime, agencies employed a higher number of asylum seekers with “exceptionally long” contracts (one or two months). Aware that many of them would not be rehired after the vacation period due to a significant drop in production, competed against one another; whoever performed better might have more chances to get another contract afterwards. I was told by asylum seekers that Italian supervisors in the warehouse directly mentioned that the most devoted workers might have the chance to be re-employed, even if those contracts were of a short duration. The constant threat of losing one’s job serves a dual purpose. On the one hand,

it indirectly put workers in competition one another, forcing them to increase their productivity; on the other, this internal competition represents a structural obstacle preventing the development of solidarity networks among workers.

In addition to being excluded from social benefits and other guarantees, subcontracted workers do not receive workplace safety training. This results in systemic injuries and sometimes lethal accidents, which are often undeclared by companies and agencies. During my fieldwork at Interporto, Yaya Yafa, a 22-year-old asylum seeker from Guinea Bissau living in Ferrara, died while working as porter on October 21, 2021,⁷⁶ after being fatally stuck between the truck he was filling with parcels for the coming morning and a partition in the warehouse. It was only his third day of working at the job, where he had a short-term subcontracted contract.

Ola, a Nigerian asylum seeker who arrived in Italy in March 2020, has been working for months in a warehouse close to the one where Yaya had worked. Every late morning, Ola receives a WhatsApp message from the employment agency advising him if he needs to go to work the coming night or not. This is how things work for hundreds of asylum seekers working at Interporto, who must be ready every day of the week to reach the warehouse overnight in case they get a morning message from the agency.

Even if his contract declares that shifts should only last four hours, Ola is required by his supervisor to stay up to four or five additional hours every night. Most of the extra hours are not paid. When I asked him if he can decide to leave after the official end of his shift, he bitterly replied that: “I can’t refuse to do extra work, otherwise they call someone else.”⁷⁷ His shift starts around at 9 p.m. and ends at 4 or 5 a.m. Afterwards, Ola takes a regional train that goes to the Bologna central station followed by a bus to his reception center, for a commute that totals more than two hours. In his warehouse, the night shift is mainly covered by black asylum seekers who

⁷⁶ (Yaya Yafa è morto a 22 anni. Era il suo terzo giorno di lavoro all’Interporto di Bologna | il manifesto).

⁷⁷ Ola, Interview with Author, February 20, 2022, Bologna.

live in the area of Bologna and Ferrara, who are from sub-Saharan countries (Mali, Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, etc.). Ola's bitter, yet pragmatic assertion that he "can't refuse to do extra work, otherwise they call someone else" intriguingly grasps one of the core functions of the humanitarian labor regime: that is to say, asylum seekers are always in surplus, in excess, and effectively in competition one another.

Bay, asylum seeker from Gambia who resided in Ola's reception center, also reflected on the systemic (over)abundance of asylum seekers who are in extreme need of work and therefore willing to accept whatever kind of job:

Not everyone accepts. Like me, for instance, I have already worked for some months in logistics, with subcontracted short-term contracts, night shifts, and it was horrible. [...] While working there, there was this Italian boss who always wanted you to do more, telling us we have to do more. [...] But if you have arrived in Bologna just for some days and you are in need of money, you accept,⁷⁸ or if you have been spending months in the camp without finding any better job, you accept. Every day they find someone willing to work at Interporto.⁷⁹

In talking about his job, Ola told me that blacks are subjected to racist discrimination by Italians and, in his own words, also by "Arab people," some of them being part of the rank-and-file union SI Cobas. In the warehouses, supervisors (in Ola's words "bosses" or *capì*) exercise forms of control and pressure against those who work as porters, who are required to fill giant trucks with parcels under constant supervision. In many cases, supervisors are Italians, but migrants from Northern Africa (such as Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia) with more stable working conditions also occupy this position.

⁷⁸ Note that according to the Italian legislation asylum seekers are allowed to work after 60 days of presenting the asylum application. However, due to a system lack of labor monitoring and forms of 'black' labor it is not rare that they start working before this two-months period.

⁷⁹ Bay, Interview with Author, March 1, 2022, Bologna. My translation from the Italian.

In order to dig deeper into this crucial point raised by Ola, it is necessary to look back at the period from 2011-2014. During that time, widespread strikes in Northern Italy were carried out in the logistics sector, from Bologna to Piacenza to Milan to Verona, often organized and coordinated by migrant workers, mainly from Northern Africa, in alliance with the SI Cobas union (Cuppini et al. 2015; Roggero and Curcio 2017). Despite structural difficulties, this wave of struggle brought about significant improvements in the quality of labor (Benvegnù et al. 2018). Many of the migrant workers who participated in the strikes were in possession of different visas, such as working visas, study visas or family reunification permits, while only a negligible percentage had an asylum document.

Starting from around 2015, however, the composition of workers at Inteporto started to change rapidly. In concomitance with the “refugee crisis,” a new “figure of labor” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) entered the organization: the asylum seeker. Since then, employment agencies and logistics companies have systematically relied on the reception system to fight back the strengthening of bargaining power SI Cobas migrant workers had gained in previous waves of struggle. In some emblematic instances, asylum seekers were employed as subcontracted workers with a one-day contract in order to substitute SI Cobas migrants who were striking. At a moment of relative class unity and substantial improvements in the quality of labor regulations, the emergence of the humanitarian labor regime enabled the flexible capture of surplus and coerced labor, which in turn led to a new racial segmentation of the labor force.

Other than signaling the limits of the SI Cobas union (Grappi 2021) by recomposing and relaunching class struggle among workers, these changes to the dynamics of migrant labor revealed the plastic processes of racialization which are taken up within specific *productive* settings. Even during the 2011-2014 wave of strikes, racial frictions were already present among workers, with managerial figures trying to pit workers against one another and undermining the possibility of solidarity and the development of unity. As reported by Curcio

(2018a, b), at that time racial discourses were largely spoken of in terms of nationality, as denounced by a migrant workers interviewed by the author.

Despite these frictions, migrant workers of SI Cobas were able to develop a certain degree of class unity and gain some important advances (Cuppini et al. 2015; Curcio 2018; Curcio and Roggero 2018). During that period, racial discourses aimed at fragmenting workers' solidarity had been the basis to relaunch the struggle led by the SI Cobas, with "ethnic networks serv[ing] as a strong-hold for building information and solidarity networks" (Benvegnù et al. 2018:99). However, the horizontal and autonomous organizational tradition of SI Cobas, often praised for its capacity to involve those workers, mainly migrants, excluded by "traditional and white" unions (Cgil, Cisl, Uil) (Benvegnù et al. 2018; Manicastro 2014), arrived at a structural impasse. As noted by Giorgio Grappi in his important work on the changing composition of labor at Interporto:

the strength acquired by unionized workers [SI Cobas], largely hired with permanent contracts through cooperatives, is in fact in danger of turning into a force contrary to the collective interests of workers. In their daily management, these unionized and stable workers find themselves in charge of commanding on colleagues who are weaker contractually, because they are temporaries, and administratively, because they are asylum seekers [in most of the cases these weaknesses are combined]. If we add to this the fact that there is a clear color division, with temporary workers largely Sub-Saharan African and cooperative employees largely North African or Asian, we understand how companies are building a trap from which we need to get out (Grappi 2021, my translation).

Within this evolving scenario, management of Interporto Bologna found in the reception system an ideal basin of contingent, disposable and coerced labor, employed with the aim of restructuring the overall organization of labor and combatting the bargaining power gained by SI Cobas during the 2011-2014 labor struggles. As I argued in Chapter 3, this rupture is not simply related to the arrival of a new wave of migrant workers; indeed, one needs to consider

the specificities pertaining to the the humanitarian labor regime as a distinct system of “raced social reproduction” (Mezzadri 2022) which highly differs from other migratory regimes.

4.3.2 BOLOGNA GOES TO BERLIN...INTEGRATION OR “INSTITUTIONAL EXPLOITATION”?

Internships are definitely one of the best answers to start a path to increase personal and professional skills and the number of work experiences actually expendable within the Italian labor market.⁸⁰

According to “Bolognacares,” an institutional network which includes the various actors involved in the territorial management of asylum seekers (such as local asylum institutions, social cooperatives, municipalities), internships for asylum seekers represents “a first step to integration.” While the systemic and generalized exploitation of asylum seekers at Interporto is not mentioned in institutional reports on the reception system in Bologna, internships are instead promoted as “good practices” for the integration of asylum seekers in the hosting society.

Except for Centro Mattei,⁸¹ most of reception facilities in Bologna are so-called SAI (Sistema Accoglienza Integrazione).⁸² In other words, reception facilities with more financial and material resources compared to CAS (Centro Accoglienza Straordinaria)⁸³, which are instead predominant in Verona. While in the CAS, the social worker is usually the only figure who is responsible for the support and oversight of asylum seekers, the SAI involves a multidisciplinary team of legal professionals, employment specialists, psychologists, and language instructors working collectively to guide asylum seekers towards socio-economic independence.

⁸⁰ <https://www.bolognacares.it/orientare-a-un-lavoro-un-primopasso-per-lintegrazione/>.

⁸¹ Centro Mattei, a former military barrack in the extreme Eastern outskirts of Bologna, has been converted into an emergency reception center (CAS) over the last decade. During arrival peaks, it hosted more than 500 asylum seekers. “Coordinamento Migrant Bologna” repeatedly denounced the degrading living conditions of the center (see: <https://www.coordinamentomigranti.org/category/centro-mattei/>; also MSF 2004).

⁸² Reception and Integration System.

⁸³ Emergency Reception Center.

As far as this work is concerned, the use of labor integration programs is among the most significant differences between SAI and CAS. As discussed above, the systemic exploitation and employment of asylum seekers in agriculture in Verona mainly occurs through informal means, by word-of-mouth between asylum seekers. This phenomenon—at once systemic and informal—also occurs in Bologna, as exemplified by the situation at Interporto, where also social workers contribute to the informal circulation about job opportunities at Interporto within reception centers. In Bologna, however, the exploitation of asylum seekers occurs also through institutional agreements and partnership, variously framed in terms of “internship programs”, between asylum institutions and employers; a phenomenon which reminds to the working of the German model of the humanitarian labor regime. Reception cooperatives play a decisive role in encouraging the use of internship programs for asylum seekers; in this sense, the boundary between a reception center and an employment agency can often be quite thin.

Luca, a social worker with several years of experience in the field of asylum, worked for more than two years as a “work operator” for a reception cooperative in Bologna. His main task consisted of deciding the most appropriate “working path” for asylum seekers. Through personal meetings with asylum seekers, Luca had to evaluate professional skills and personal aspirations in order to encourage asylum seekers’ integration into the labor market of Bologna. Usually, he told me, the first step is either a training course or an internship:

Clearly, you have to mediate between the asylum seeker’s desire and the reality of the labor market in Bologna. Usually, we need to negotiate with the asylum seeker and let him understand that a training course or an internship can be the best way to put a step into the labor market. [...] Many opt for manual jobs, such as mechanics, cleaners and so on.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Luca, Interview with Author, November 2, 2021, Bologna. My translation from Italian.

Basically, Luca was in charge of finding and contacting those companies willing to accept an intern. Some companies had a fast-track channel for such purposes, as they had already accepted asylum seekers for internships before. By default, Luca told me during the interview, there exists a direct and structural connection between reception cooperatives and specific companies in Bologna:

Usually, the internship lasts for a minimum of three months up to a maximum of one year. The intern is paid 450 euros per month for a full-time position, 40 hours per week. The most interesting aspect is that the first three months are paid by the reception cooperative, which gets the money from a special asylum fund of the Ministry of the Interior. After three months, the company decides whether to renew the internship or not. [...] Clearly, I am honest with you, this is nothing else other than a form of institutional exploitation. We are dealing with a complex institutional framework that allows for a worker to be paid 450 euros full-time for up to one year, even without social benefits and holidays...⁸⁵

According to Luca, at the end of the three-month period, companies adopt quite different behavior. Some decide to renew the internship, as it is nonetheless convenient for them, while others opt for having new asylum seekers for another three-month period. In this way, the company effectively has a contingent and disposable “free” labor, which is paid from the state:

I know many hotels in Bologna which rely on the internship program. Asylum seekers are mainly employed as cleaners...After the three-month period they call me and say “Luca, listen, these asylum seekers are not really good...Can you send us another six for the coming three months?” When I receive these kinds of calls I get angry, and I refuse to play their game...but I know that this is a systemic phenomenon in Bologna...every three months, companies can get new asylum seekers as interns paid from the state.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Luca, Interview with Author, November 2, 2021, Bologna. My translation from Italian.

⁸⁶ Luca, Interview with Author, November 2, 2021, Bologna. My translation from the Italian.

Luca's insights shed a quite different light on internship programs in Bologna if compared with their official aim. Officially promoted as "good practices" encouraging the socio-economic integration of asylum seekers in their first steps towards independence, these programs are in fact the perfect institutional means for companies to have a workforce for free in the name of inclusion, equality, and integration.

From this perspective, rather than being a first step into the labor market, the internship programs appear more to be a system of "institutional exploitation," in Luca's words. According to Luca, it is almost impossible that asylum seekers obtain a real contract after the internship period is over. In the more than two years in his position, he was not able to remember during our meetings an asylum seeker who managed to get a contract after the internship. Moreover, given the low remuneration of the internship, Luca told me that many asylum seekers quit after some months and go (back) to working at Interporto, which despite its brutal conditions, grants a higher salary.

To have an idea of the scale of the internship economy in Bologna, we can have a look at the financial statements of CIDAS⁸⁷, a social cooperative that annually reports the number of internships undertaken by asylum seekers in the Bologna area. In 2020, CIDAS initiated 576 internships, 110 internships in 2021, and 118 internships in 2022 (see CIDAS 2020, 2021, 2022). While the financial statements neither report the sectors involved nor the number of internships that were converted into effective and real contracts, a former social worker of CIDAS interviewed during my fieldwork confided that less than 10% of asylum seekers obtained a contract after their internship.

Hence, one might argue that in Bologna internship programs serves a double necessity, both material and symbolic. On the one hand, they directly assure the making of unpaid and contingent labor which is absorbed by an array of industries in the area of Bologna

⁸⁷ *Cooperativa Inserimento Disabili Assistenza Solidarietà*, <https://www.cidas.coop/>.

(accommodation, gastronomy, cleaning services, etc.). On the other hand, they function also as powerful symbols of “inclusion” and “integration” claimed by local institutions and reception cooperatives in a city where such values are nominally central to its cultural and political identity. However, these values are in fact subsumed by the orientation towards the accumulation of capital through a peculiar alliance of private, public and third sector actors, which cooperate in the neoliberal government of the city.

Other than the “proximity factor” discussed previously, it is of pivotal importance to note that the humanitarian labor regime adapts and mutates according to territorial contexts. In a recent article on the humanitarian government, Paolo Novak (2022) noted that the literature on asylum tended to overlook how pre-existing socio-political arrangements of a given territory contribute to the always site-specific reproduction of humanitarian practices and discourses. When the humanitarian labor regime “hits the ground,” it does so by adapting to unique socio-political arrangements, and, in turn, is transformed and reproduced in unique ways. Seen from this perspective, the internship programs in Bologna can be understood as a territorial declination of the humanitarian labor regime to an urban context with a specific administrative infrastructure and socio-political cultural identity.

4.4 BERLIN: DIFFERENCE OR REPETITION?

Internship programs not only challenge the distinction between a reception center and an employment agency but also serve as our gateway to Berlin as a research site. These programs can be understood as a partial representation of the humanitarian labor regime adapted to a German context, where, as we mentioned in the first section of this chapter, asylum and labor policy significantly intertwined during the 2010s. While in Italy the exploitation of the seeking asylum population often occurs without institutional agreements and a formal coordination between asylum offices, employment agencies, reception cooperatives, companies, civil society

organizations, vocational schools, in Germany these different actors are variously and officially connected with the aim to select and integrate the seeking asylum population within local labor markets (Etzold 2017; Maroufi 2017).

Most notably, while in Bologna “internship programs” are not compulsory, in Germany asylum seekers are obliged to decide among a series of educational or professional opportunities in order not to lose some of their political and social benefits. In various cases, job or education opportunities are offered by appointed asylum offices in coordination with public employment agencies (Maroufi 2022). When asylum seekers find employment autonomously, they are required to wait for approval from these organizations, and they cannot work outside the region (*Länder*) where they originally presented their asylum application (territorial limitation). If one focuses on policy and legislation alone, they might note that the German model of the humanitarian labor regime is characterized by additional coercive elements (e.g. obligation to work, territorial limitation) which are absent in Italy. However, this does not necessarily result in the worst working conditions.

When I initially arrived in Berlin, indeed, I encountered a series of shocked reactions when describing the working conditions of asylum seekers in the Italian labor market. The working situations at Interporto and in the agricultural enclave in Verona are undoubtedly brutal, both in terms of the pace of work, lack of guarantees, informality, overwork, long hours, and, in the case of Interporto, anti-black politics. When talking with migrant activists, social workers, unionists and researchers in Berlin, it seemed that similar situations afflicting asylum seekers were not as present there.

In light of the institutionalized integration between the “field of asylum” and the “field of labor” (Etzold 2017) discussed above, one might think that specific groups of asylum seekers in Germany are, on the one hand, subjected to a more pervasive dynamic of socio-legal coercion than in Italy. On the other hand, this means that their “unfree activation” (Maroufi 2022) occurs

through formal means and, to some extent, ensures a minimum standard of working conditions. Even if in Germany, like in Italy, programs for voluntary and unpaid work have been implemented, the fact that asylum seekers always have a working contract means that they have some guarantees (at least on paper). This means, overall, that this formal level, so to speak, of the German humanitarian labor regime might lead to a series of guaranteed and stable working situations, despite the fact that asylum seekers may have been channeled to specific jobs and sectors.

This situation is epitomized by the story of Ali, the Eritrean asylum seeker we met in Chapter 1 who brought to the fore the Italian colonization of Eritrea. Ali arrived in Germany in 2016, and since his arrival had lived in a reception center located in the northeastern outskirts of Berlin; far more than one hour from the city center. There, he shares an independent housing unit—composed of two single rooms and a common space—with another asylum seeker who works for a multinational logistical company. Once Ali received a positive response to his asylum application, he began to work. He found the job through a public employment agency, which proposed to him a series of possible occupations:

Initially they offered me a handyman-like job...I was supposed to change jobs and workplaces every day...like one day cleaning offices, the day after maybe security guard outside shopping centers, and so on...luckily, they offered me a second job opportunity and I opted for that one...⁸⁸

Since December 2019, Ali has been working for a workplace canteen where people from various countries (including Afghanistan, Germany, Poland, and Vietnam) are employed. Initially, he did a two-week trial, after which he signed on to two successive one-year contracts, eventually obtaining a permanent, full-time position. Ali worked around 40 hours per week, and each extra

⁸⁸ Ali, Interview with the Author, June 29, 2022, Berlin.

hour is paid and declared in the payroll. Ali did not like the job, especially because the atmosphere was quite tense and discussions among workers were mundane: “Since there are a lot of people from different countries, almost every day there are fights and arguments among workers, everyone just wants to work for himself and there is no solidarity among workers.”⁸⁹ Although he earned a decent salary, he was in need of more money because wanted to help his family be able to join him in Berlin. Thus, in 2021 he also started a so-called “mini-job”, earning 450 euros per month (for 40 hours of work per month). In his two days off from the first job, Ali travels around Berlin to clean offices, buildings, and hotels for a cleaning agency. In total, he worked more than 50 hours per week.

Although Ali did not like his job, his working conditions were significant better compared to that in Italy. In the one year of fieldwork in Bologna and Verona, I had never met with an asylum seeker with a full-time, permanent contract. As discussed in detail above, the humanitarian labor regime does not operate in a social vacuum. Rather, it adapts and mutates according to distinct socio-economic, cultural, political, and territorial factors. This means, for instance, that one has to consider the quality of local labor markets in terms of social guarantees, policy, laws, union struggles, and other factors in contexts where asylum seekers are employed. However, it is important to remember that the humanitarian labor regime not only adapts to pre-existing labor conditions, but it also might contribute to their further flexibilization of and (racial) segmentation (see 3.5).

Although Ali could afford an independent household on his earnings, at the time of our meeting he was still living in the reception facility. Due to a series of factors, including overt (anti-Black) racism and rampant gentrification in the German capital, he did not manage to find an apartment. In addition to being located in the extreme outskirts of the city, since he had started working, he had also lost the social benefit of “free accommodation.” Thus, he had to pay

⁸⁹ Interview, June 29, 2022, Berlin.

a rent of 600 per month to the asylum agency. This reveals, once again, how asylum has become an intriguing site to investigate the “extractive frontier” of contemporary capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019; Tazzioli 2022).

Like Ali, Abdullah, an asylum seeker from Syria, experienced a similar situation of “unfree activation” (Maroufi 2022) once he obtained refugee status in Berlin. He had arrived in Germany through the Mediterranean route (by way of Greece, Lampedusa, Sicily, Italy, Austria) in 2016, after being repeatedly and arbitrarily moved through a series of “camps”: first from Munchen to Hamburg, and from Hamburg eventually to Berlin. Once he obtained refugee status at the end of 2017, he opted to take a German course: “I could either study German and reach at least the B1 level within a given period of time, or start a job they offered me...I had to decide between these two options, no questions...”⁹⁰ He studied German for several years and, since early 2018, has started working as a food-delivery person for various companies. Unlike Ali, however, he moved to a shared apartment in a central neighborhood of the city with some acquaintances and friends from Syria.

Abdullah and Ali’s experiences exemplify how the ability to integrate economically has been incorporated as a driving rationality of the German asylum regime, an aspect which is absent in the Italian context. While asylum seekers in Germany were effectively forced to choose between a series of professional or educational offers, their refugee status granted them formal (albeit constrained) access to the labor market (as in the case of Ali) or access to a German language course, with a compulsory level to reach within a given period of time (as in the case of Abdullah). The provisioning of educational and professional opportunities is however limited only to specific groups of asylum seekers, while others are excluded from such coercive measures.

⁹⁰ Interview, July 7, 2022, Berlin.

Rejected asylum seekers, for instance, have even more limited possibilities to access formal pathways to “integration” compared with Abdullah and Ali. Most notably, those rejected asylum seekers with a “temporary ban” on their deportation status might be formally prevented from entering the labor market, other than being barred from accessing educational and professional resources (Maroufi 2022). As we can expect, this leads to a proliferation of informal circuits of capital, with entire sectors of the seeking asylum population forced to find informal employment as excluded from accessing the German labor market.

Mustafa, a Nigerian asylum seeker whose asylum application was rejected, was excluded from professional and educational opportunities, even if not prevented from working in Germany. His master’s degree was not recognized by German authorities, and he entered the Berlin labor market through informal means, aided by acquaintances, friends, and migrant support groups. He also attended language classes organized by a migrant support group active in a central neighborhood of the city, and passed the B1 German exam. Through these informal networks, Mustafa found a series of short-term and day jobs. Without contracts, he worked in the gastronomy and construction sectors for several months. Afterwards, he managed to obtain a fixed-term contract as a clerk in a supermarket in the city center. Following that, he again began to meander through a series of various day jobs around the city. Well aware of the difficulty of winning an appeal on his asylum application, he is nevertheless confident that his asylum lawyer, with whom he has a friendly relationship, can postpone the verdict as long as he can. In the case of a negative response, Mustafa could risk losing the right to work in Germany. As illustrated above, however, having being excluded from official pathways of “integration,” he had mostly only been able to work in an informal manner.

The labor trajectories of Ali, on the one hand, and Mustafa, on the other, show two facets of the German humanitarian labor regime. On the one hand, there are those groups of asylum seekers who are able to access resources and services aimed at integrating them into the labor market through formal means (albeit constrained to a few limited options); on the other, there

are asylum seekers who are excluded from this infrastructure who may very well end up working in the informal economy. Here, I argue, the relation between the humanitarian labor regime and the informal economy in Berlin is structural and systemic: it is not only rejected asylum seekers like Mustafa who seek out opportunities through the informal economy, but also asylum seekers still waiting for the response to their application.

While asylum applications are still pending, asylum seekers are not directly obligated to work or to further their education. During this period, which may last several years, asylum seekers living in reception centers usually find work on their own. Like in the case of Interporto Bologna, this often occurs by word of mouth within reception centers; asylum seekers find informal employment in the city in sectors like gastronomy, cleaning and household services, and construction. Unlike in Bologna, for what I could observe while there, reception workers are not involved in circulating information about the availability of informal jobs. Rather, informal networks seem to function exclusively through the circulation and exchange of information between asylum seekers, on the one hand, and employment agencies and companies on the other.

During his asylum application, for instance, which lasted more than a year and a half, Abdullah had done several jobs across industries, including gastronomy, cleaning, security, construction. Based on advice and word-of-mouth from other asylum seekers he met in various reception centers he was moved across Berlin, Abdullah spent one year and half doing informal jobs on a day-by-day basis. For example, he worked for several months as a kitchen helper for a restaurant in a central and highly gentrified neighborhood of the city, where most of the other employees were asylum seekers. He was required to go there six days per week for shifts of nine or ten hours, with an hourly payment of four euros. Afterwards, he worked for six months as a security guard at a supermarket. He was paid seven euros per hour with ten hours shifts without breaks. When unemployed, he occasionally worked as an office cleaner and bricklayer. None of these occupations came with any kind of contract. These informal sides of the Berlin

humanitarian labor regime, therefore, are intriguingly similar to the socio-economic landscape observed in Verona and Bologna.

According to Abdullah, the nexus between the reception system and informal circuits of labor is systemic in Berlin, especially with regards to the gastronomy, cleaning and security service industries. Every early morning, asylum seekers leave their reception facility, taking public transportation to reach the city's restaurant kitchens, offices, and supermarkets for their daily, underpaid, and invisible shifts. If one considers that in the German capital, more than 25.000 asylum seekers are currently living in hundreds of reception facilities scattered across the city, it is possible to have an idea of the relevance of the humanitarian labor regime in sustaining the local informal economy, which essentially underpin the local formal economic structure.

Exploring the invisibilized, yet fundamental role of women and negatively racialized communities in sustaining the everyday making of urban centers of the world, Françoise Vergès (2019) noted how urban economic activities, such as gastronomy, office work, and hotels have always had a series of “phantom figures” who we tend to systemically neglect: indeed, “who opens the city?,” Vergès asks. In the case of Berlin, as well as in many other cities worldwide, women and negatively racialized communities are the “phantom figures” who daily (and informally) clean offices and hotels, work in restaurant kitchens, and remain for entire days outside supermarkets and shopping malls as security guards. In contemporary Berlin, this “phantom” economy is significantly comprised by asylum seekers who are warehoused in the several reception centers scattered across the city: the phantom side of the German humanitarian labor regime.

4.5 BEYOND THE HUMANITARIAN LABOR REGIME?

In the pages above I summarized part of the ethnographic material emerged during fieldwork. In particular, I mainly focused on the role played by the humanitarian labor regime in assuring

the capture of contingent and coerced, sometimes unpaid (Bologna), labor according to the need of the distinct industries in different socio-territorial contexts. As such, I reflected on what I termed the “proximity factor.” When asylum seekers are moved and “warehoused” (Vianelli 2021) to a specific territory, they mostly like ending up working in a series of “low-skilled” sectors which are prevalent in that territorial landscape. Other than Abdullah, who managed to find an independent apartment in the center of Berlin through some Syrian friends, the other asylum seekers we met in the pages above lived in reception centers for years. In many situations, reception facilities represent the “lesser evil” housing solution for asylum seekers, who, for various reasons, struggle to find an independent household. Ali, for instance, who was granted a refugee status and could afford a rent in Berlin, did not manage to leave the reception he lived in.

In other cases, however, asylum seekers leave reception centers and continue their migratory journey across European territories (Fontanri 2019). In Chapter 1, for example, I briefly mention the case of some Tunisian migrants who, upon arrival in reception centers in Bologna, moved out after few days and decided to join a series of ethnic and social networks which may provide accommodation and other resources to migrants who are most likely destined to become illegal. Coming from a “safe third country of origin”, indeed, Tunisian people have few chances to obtain an asylum document. Unveiling these informal and (in)visible mobilities beyond the archipelago of reception allows us not losing sight of the subjective capacities people on the move might exercise against the “logistics of asylum” (Vianelli 2021). Moreover, as I anticipated in the pages above, one does not have to consider the humanitarian labor regime as a smooth and perfectly coordinated infrastructure of government. This infrastructure, for instance, is comprised of an array of multiple and highly variegated actors with different temporalities, resources, and rationalities.

This means that on the ground things are always more complex and nuanced than they may appear on paper. The history of Katou, a Senegalese asylum seeker, from this perspective, might

help us to acknowledging the complexity, and to some extent, the inconsistency, of the humanitarian labor regime. The map in the pages below was sketched out in a collaborative effort between me and Katou during an interview conducted in Mantova, a city close by Verona, in September 2021 (see Figure 1). Arrived in Italy in 2016, Katou was transferred by bus from Southern Italy to a reception center in the Mantova province. After a few months, however, the social cooperative managing Katou's and other reception facilities went bankrupt, leaving him and other asylum seekers without a place to stay. Katou was expelled from the reception center, a former two-storey house in a small village in the Mantova province, without a place to sleep. Initially, he lived for some weeks at an acquaintance's house close by Mantova and then he began to migrate in Italy in search of employment. As the map we crafted together clearly show, Katou's mobility over 6 years of being in Italy unfolded across the following spaces: other than Mantova, he cyclically went to Saluzzo, Rosarno, and Foggia, which are indeed critical agriculture enclaves that seasonally attracts thousands of (irregular) migrants who live in a series of informal encampments adjacent to the fields.⁹¹ There, Katou lived in makeshift shelters and worked piecework, earning not more than 20 euros per day. He cyclically returned to these places because, albeit the brutality of the working and living conditions, was not able to find any other employment, and he primarily returning to Mantua for reasons related to his asylum residence permit.

Katou's situation is by no means exceptional. Due to various reasons, social cooperatives which go bankrupts, bureaucratic errors or delays in the asylum procedures, rejection in the asylum procedures, subjective calculus, an indefinite number of asylum seekers leave the reception archipelago and often end up wandering throughout a scattered archipelago made up by informal or (para)institutional encampments in proximity of workplaces (Peano 2021).

⁹¹ A series of research investigated the depletive working and living conditions in these agricultural enclaves, see: Corrado (2011), Corrado et al. (2017), Gambino (2017), Ippolito et al. (2021), MEDU (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019), Perrotta (2015).

According to recent estimates, 670.000 migrant people live in Italy without residency documents in conditions of socio-economic marginality subjected to “slave-alike” forms of exploitation (Amnesty International 2019; UNCHR 2019). Most of these people were asylum seekers. This basin of illegalized laborers, which is nowadays essential in assuring the agriculture production and fuelling informal circuits of value, is not an exception neither a temporary phenomenon if related to the working of the humanitarian labor regime. Rather, it represents one of its constitutive informal undersides. The emergence and evolution of these informal settlements, which function in similar ways to the reception archipelago in relation to the labor market, is a direct repercussion of a series of elements endogenous to the humanitarian labor regime. The humanitarian logic of asylum, which implies the perpetual rejection of “undeserving” applicants causing their illegality, the broader dimension of the “postcolonial asylum infrastructure”, which socio-spatially reorganizes, in entropic and destructive terms and for prolonged periods of times, the lives of people on the move, necessarily imply the perpetual creation of irregular people who live, like Katou, at the margins of society. The spatiality of the humanitarian labor regime, therefore, is not only limited to the horizon of the “reception archipelago.” It also includes a protean constellation composed of make-shifts and informal encampments hosting the ten of thousands of (rejected) asylum seekers who are excluded from the sphere of rights and from social benefits. As noted by Irene Peano (2021), this encampment archipelago has become a structural feature of contemporary racial capitalism (Mbembe 2017; Robinson 2000), reproducing a workforce subjected to a highly depletive politics of life-and-death (see Chapter 3).

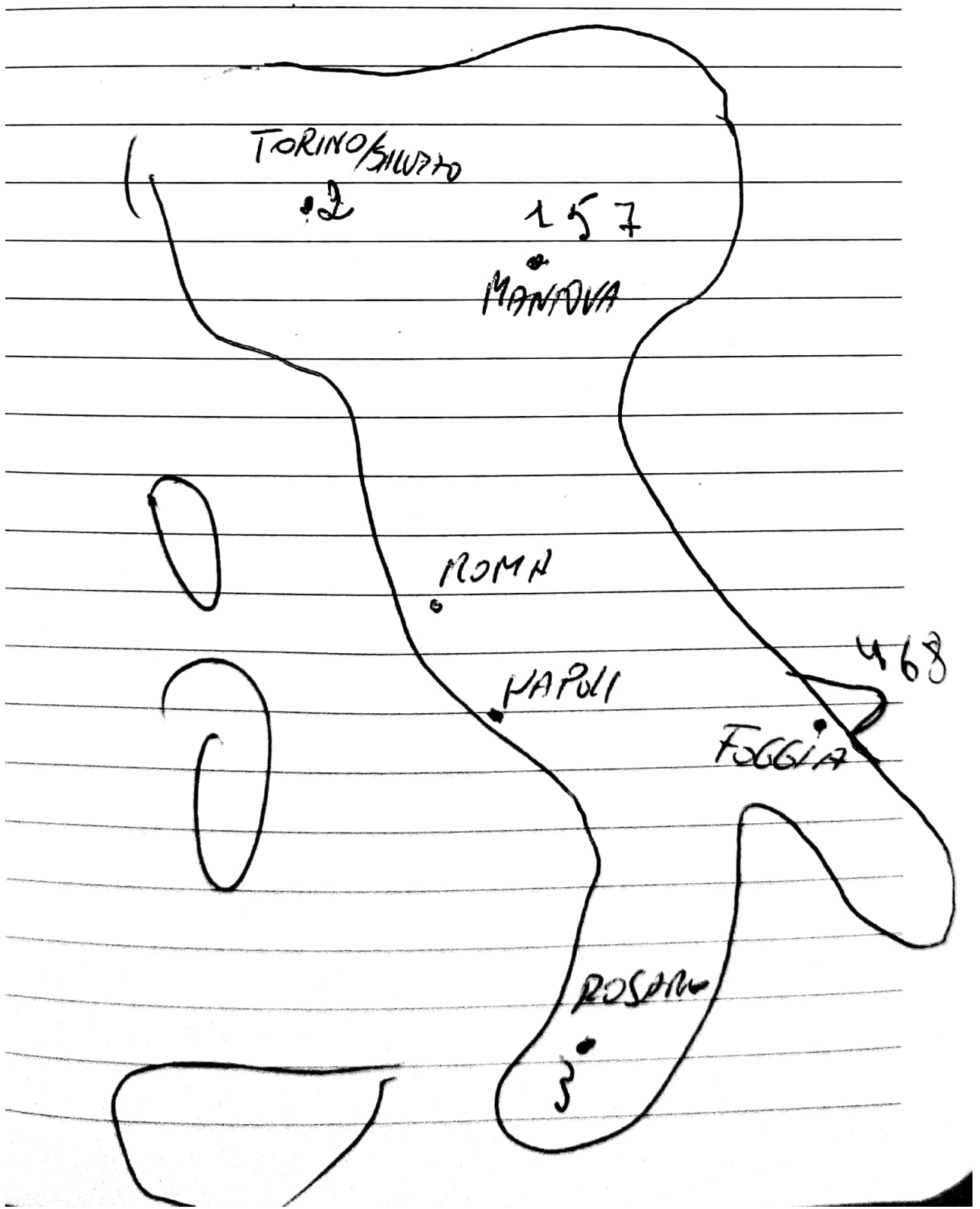


Figure 1.

In lieu of a conclusion

WHO NEEDS RECEPTION?

No jailer frees his prisoner, all the more so when the prisoner constitutes the *raison d'être* of the jailer.

— Enrico Beniamino de Notaris (my translation).

I am in a café in the center of Bologna with Marco, who works in a social cooperative. The cooperative provides various services, including childcare, elder care, support for unhoused people, and providing aid to asylum seekers. Marco, who had worked with asylum seekers for several years, starts to share with me his opinions about the structural problems of the reception system in the area of Bologna. At a certain point of the conversation, his discourse takes a radical and unexpected turn. Without mincing words, he overturns the perspective: “The fact is that we need them, it is the reception system that needs asylum seekers, not the other way around.”⁹² According to Marco, without asylum seekers, indeed, social cooperatives would not have the means to generate value. The presence of asylum seekers sustains the very economic existence of many cooperatives and companies, as those in charge of managing asylum seekers receive public funds in exchange for providing various services such as accommodation, food, psychological support, and job search assistance. As has been shown in some investigations, financial groups have also entered the management of reception centers and migrant detention centers (CILD 2023; Liberti 2014; Battaglia 2020).

Despite differences in the management of asylum seekers and the provision of services, which may vary significantly according to different parameters (see Chapter 4), Marco’s discourse is a structural one. Indeed, it is thanks to what might be deemed “mass refugification” that multiple

⁹² Marco, Interview with Author, Bologna, November 26, 2021, my translation from Italian.

circuits of value have developed in Europe during a moment of irreversible political economic and social crisis. Marco contends that “if there were generalized public housing programmes and a different visa system for migrants, for example, many asylum seekers would have not been in reception facilities but in a proper house. However, public housing programmes for the less privileged are progressively disappearing and fewer and fewer people can afford housing, and at the same time the reception system generates profit in many ways, and is therefore beneficial to our crisis economy.”⁹³

Marco’s argument, indeed a very direct and explicit one, develops a central issue which was elaborated on in the preceding pages. In a historical context of structural cuts to services and social policies, asylum has been used to exclude millions of people from direct and unconditional access to the sphere of rights and social services by developing an articulated system of contingent and highly differentiated legal statuses according to evolving hierarchies of deservingness. Simultaneously, asylum has emerged as a crucial “extractive frontier” of neoliberal capitalism (Mezzadra, Neilson 2019).

Marco goes on to explain the way circuits of value function in Bologna. Firstly, due to the presence of asylum seekers, millions of Euros pass from state coffers to a constellation of social cooperatives, consortia, private enterprises, and multinational corporations. Secondly, some cooperatives in Bologna employ asylum seekers, as unpaid or underpaid labor for various tasks. For instance, if a cooperative manages both asylum seekers and childcare facilities, asylum seekers are often employed as unpaid workers to clean the childcare facilities managed by the same cooperative. This way, the cooperative does not have to recruit additional laborers to work for them. Thirdly, Marco mentions the internship programs. As I discussed in the previous chapters, these programs are officially promoted as virtuous and “win-win” practices of

⁹³ Marco, Interview with Author, Bologna, November 26, 2021, my translation from Italian.

integration, yet they effectively embody an institutionalized regime of migrant labor exploitation at the service of private companies who essentially receive contingent labor for free.

Moreover, we need to consider the various workers that are required to make reception sustainable, such as social workers, cultural mediators, psychologists, teachers, and administrative staff. Despite the fact that workers are often employed with precarious contracts and subjected to exploitation, the emergence of the reception system has undeniably provided employment opportunities for thousands of people. Even in economically depressed areas where asylum seekers are not directly integrated into the labor market, reception centers have offered employment opportunities for the local population (Marchi 2024a). Last but not least, as I have discussed throughout this work, the reception system has become a spatio-racial infrastructure assuring the reproduction of forced and disposable labor, which is in turn essential to restructuring European labor markets in order to ensure the consistent flow of capital.

Overall, Marco's approach is primarily economic. Others, however, have explored the ambiguous meaning of reception politics from a political standpoint. Indeed, the idea of reception erases Europe's historical and political responsibilities regarding structural racism against non-white humanity, which nowadays is mainly embodied by asylum seekers and illegalized migrants (Danewid 2017; Mellino 2019; Picozza 2021). The implicit discourse in the idea of reception reproduces the notion of a "white innocent" Europe (Wekker 2014) that displays empathy toward more vulnerable individuals. The legacy of colonial history and politics, which is clearly reflected in the discriminatory migration policies currently in place, as well as the socio-legal hierarchies perpetuated by the European asylum regime and its coercive dimensions all seem to disappear in such solidaristic discourses, urging the need to welcome less fortunate migrants (Danewid 2017). Europe, in this perspective, projects a receptive and solidaristic image as a way of re-establishing its alleged moral and political superiority in relation to postcolonial Others.

Like Giorgio in the first chapter, who attempted to trouble the idea of “forced migration,” Marco’s reflection aims to reverse the meaning of reception, and instead question the dominant discourse surrounding the “refugee crisis:” *Who needs reception?* This is the question Marco indirectly posed while we were talking—a question that might seem a simple provocation, but which in reality, could be used as a method to escape the naturalization of the humanitarian order of things (De Lauri 2019), where asylum and reception are presented as sort of inevitable horizon for specific negatively racialized population groups. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this work, indeed, the impressive increase of asylum seekers and the reception facilities during the 2010s in Europe, the processes I described as “mass refugification + reception expansion”, is strictly linked to an array of socio-legal, political, and racial processes driven by specific (geo)political and economic interests, rather than solely to moral concerns.

In recent years, some scholars and activists have sought to translate abolitionist practices on the “Prison Industrial Complex” to address the racial and exclusionary governance of migrants, both in the European context and beyond (Anderson et al. 2009; Bradley and de Noronha 2022; De Genova and Tazzioli 2023; Loyd et al 2014). Abolitionist critiques of the “Prison Industrial Complex” remind us that talking about, “prison amelioration,” for instance, means to implicitly take for granted a set of racial and punitive premises rather than genuinely trying to discard them. Having in mind Marco’s pragmatic attitude and thinking through his somehow disorienting assertion—that Europe needs asylum seekers, rather than the other way round—helps to break a series of assumptions about reception as the ideal manner of governing non-white migration. Rather than simply discussing the “amelioration” of reception policies, we should not forget it is the racial and punitive premises underlying this governance model, which indeed has a specific genealogy and manner of reproduction.

WHY THE ASYLUM SEEKER?

During my fieldwork in Bologna, I engaged in a thought-provoking conversation with Maura, a reception social worker who has an academic background in the field of migration studies. While discussing the working conditions of black asylum seekers at Interporto, and their (racial) subordination to North African migrant workers arrived in Italy in a previous migratory conjuncture (early 2000s'), she speculated on the reason behind this hierarchical (racial) sorting between these two groups of workers. According to her, the divide mainly stemmed from temporal factors. Having arrived approximately 15 years prior to asylum seekers, North African migrants were able to establish a series of socio-political ties and ethnic networks. Over time, these networks facilitated the development and strengthening of class unity and bargaining power, which in turn contributed to the partial and temporary improvement of their working conditions at Interporto, especially during the 2011-2014 period (see Chapter 4). Without any doubt, time is a crucial factor within the evolving and site-specific tensions between labor and capital. And labor struggle represents an enduring, somehow infinite, process that requires adaptation to changing power relationships.

Maura's explanation seemed accurate to me, yet partial and incomplete. Throughout my research project, I cyclically reflected on the conversation I had with her. This ethnographic episode, along with many others presented in the pages that compose this dissertation, pushed me to develop the analytical and theoretical framework of the humanitarian labor regime, namely a distinct spatio-racial politics of labor emerged in Europe in the wake of the 2008 global crisis. The more I came back to Maura's interpretation of the (racial) hierarchies of class at Interporto, the more I felt that something was missing in her analytical overview. Why did (black) asylum seekers occupy among the most precarious working positions? *Why the asylum seeker?* Is temporality the one and only reason favoring their labor subjugation and

subordination to other groups of (migrant) workers, or, do we need to consider other complementary factors?

As I tried to demonstrate with this work, it is crucial to consider and address the modalities through which distinct migratory regimes impact the way people live and, consequently, work. The European asylum regime, or the specific governance model that emerged in the wake of the crisis, which I have termed “mass refugification + reception expansion,” has had long-lasting and pervasive effects in shaping distinct forms of disposable and coerced labor. Individuals on the move who are compelled to seek asylum to regularize their presence in Europe are subjected to a series of socio-legal dynamics, spatial regimes, and racializing procedures that differ significantly, for instance, from those who migrated to Italy and Europe in the early 2000s through “working visa” programs.

I argued that understanding the logistics of asylum is crucial for grasping the nuances of the humanitarian labor regime. This indeed implies a systemic devaluation of migrants’ lives, as they are deprived of their human autonomy and treated as passivized targets of a politics of life haunted by specters of (social and physical) death (Chapter 3). By exploring the relationship between space, social reproduction, and racial capitalism, I conceptualized the humanitarian labor regime as a distinct infrastructure of labor reproduction revolving around the “encampment archipelago”—an heterogenous array of institutional, para-institutional, and informal spaces (such as hotspots, reception centers, detention centers, makeshift camps, etc.) where migrant labor is reproduced under specific debilitating conditions (Puar 2017; Pallister-Wilkins 2021). The horizon of the household, the direct access to social and political rights, the systemic provision of public services (welfare), the making of social and ethnic networks, all factors and dimensions we usually associate with the reproduction of labor, at least in regard to specific times and places of capitalist development, have been heavily replaced by an infrastructure of government which forces distinct racialized populations being confined at the —socio-political, spatial, legal—margins of the society. Adopting an analytical gaze attentive

to historical assonances and long *durée* processed, I unveiled a “disturbing similarity” between the reproduction of slave labor of modernity and the making of the asylum seeker as a distinct figure of unfree labor (see Chapter 3).

In chapter 2 I explored strategies of survival enacted by people entrapped within this debilitating system of government. Instead of considering the material dimension of survival, which has been broadly studied by the literature on the “autonomy of migration”, my ethnographic experience pushed me excavating the importance of forms of belonging and kinship in assuring the making and reproduction of life as a life-in-common. I paid attention, for instance, to the role of Blackness in favoring the development of malleable, fragmented, yet pervasive and durable, forms of (collective) subjectivation that transcended national forms of belonging.

Seeing race not merely as a discourse external to the self but rather as a complex assemblage with ontological repercussions, enabled developing an analytical framework capable of contemplating the presence of “exogenous elements” which integrated, and possibly exacerbated, the racializing effects of the humanitarian labor regime. As a form of subjective embodiment, Blackness seemed favoring the subjugation of specific groups of asylum seekers in distinct geographical contexts, as in the case of Interporto. Therefore, the “endogenous elements” of the humanitarian labor regime, delineated in the chapters above, function always in relation to series of external factors (e.g. race-as-embodiment, gender, labor policy, union dynamics, pre-existing class dynamics etc.) which give rise to distinct and quite specific class formations in each territorial context.

During my conversation with Maura in Bologna I did not reply to her assertive explanation, as my analytical framework and my ideas were still chaotic and in the making. After a couple of years of further reasoning, I hope this work could provide some complementary answers to her interpretation. Of course, time plays a pivotal role in the organization and racialization of (migrant) labor. At the same time, the radical shift in the government of migration occurred

during the 2010s needs to be properly addressed and considered. The humanitarian labor regime is my, partial and provisional, answer to the foundational question of “Why the asylum seeker?”

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