

Jennifer Burns
University of Warwick

Implicated and “Unwilling” Labours of Mediterranean
Migration in Francesca Mannocchi’s *Io Khaled vendo uomini
e sono innocente* (2019)

Abstract

Using as its lens Francesca Mannocchi’s second-hand autobiography of a Libyan people trafficker, *Io Khaled vendo uomini e sono innocente* (2019), this article examines the position of the trafficker within the intersecting regimes of labour in the Mediterranean in the C21st. Khaled’s testimony challenges the reader to reflect critically upon how a citizen of Libya might construct agency within an environment of relentless oppression by means of exploitative labour. This challenge is contextualized within research across disciplines into the complex border that the contemporary Mediterranean Sea has been made to constitute (De Genova 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and in response to a forensic oceanography study by Heller and Pezzani (2017) identifying the sea itself as being implicated as an ‘unwilling killer’, like Khaled, in this externally-generated field of tension. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work on vulnerability (2016), the article posits trafficking, like migrant mobility, as a basis for acts of resistance.

1. *Introduction*

The cover of Francesca Mannocchi’s testimony of a people trafficker, Khaled, offered in the first person but under her authorship, introduces the figure of the narrating ‘io’ to the reader as what I will term an ‘unwilling killer’, borrowing and repurposing this notion from Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani (Heller and Pezzani 2017, 106).¹ A medium close-up of a male with short, dark, curly

1 Mannocchi 2019. The use by Heller and Pezzani of this term to describe the Mediterranean Sea, and my own adaptation of the concept, will be discussed below.

hair, probably in his twenties or thirties, covering his face with both hands, bespeaks the shame of not wanting to be seen by others as well as implying his own unwillingness to see the work he is responsible for. Underscored verbally by the statement of the book’s title, where a man fitting this profile states his name and his illegal profession whilst also claiming ‘innocence’, the cover image introduces to the reader a witness existing in the tension between the labour he chooses to perform and its consequences that he cannot bear to face.

My analysis of Mannocchi’s text will focus on the insight it affords into a form of labour related to migrations to Italy but deterritorialized. Narratives in Italian of the work of migrants themselves became embedded in Italian literature, performance and screen culture in the 1990s and 2000s, figuring this as low-paid, semi-skilled or unskilled labour, generally informal and sometimes illegal.² By contrast, the life narrative written by Mannocchi of Khaled’s work takes the reader out of Italy to the southern shore of the Mediterranean, telling of the work of a Libyan national whose trade is to sell Mediterranean crossings to migrants passing through the border zone of Libya from the Sahel, Middle East and South Asia towards Italy. As such, it tells the story of the perpetrator rather than of the ‘victim’, to use the terms familiar from media constructions of migrants’ experiences. Echoing the first-person mode of well-known migration narratives in Italian, particularly Pap Khouma’s foundational story published in 1990, *Io, venditore di elefanti*, Khaled’s story stakes a claim to using this narrative form to “humanise” the trafficker, as vilified and non-individuated object of political and media attention, held responsible for migrant journeys and deaths at sea in such a way as to deflect attention from ineffective governmental measures to manage Mediterranean mobility.

Mannocchi interestingly gives the reader no paratextual information about the relationship that undergirds her writing of Khaled’s narrative. She leaves the reader to imagine the circumstances of the life narrative coming into being in print form, and thus challenges them to recognize the multiple intersubjective narrative transactions that may have made the text. Here, it is worth referenc-

2 These works connect to a longer tradition of literary and cinematic narratives in Italian of C20th-21st migrations out of and within Italy, often including figures of the trafficker or facilitator though more rarely exposing in detail their subjectivity. An extensive critical bibliography dating from the late 1990s analyses the diverse body of works in Italian authored by migrant, postcolonial and transnational subjects, e.g. Parati 2005, Burns 2013, Mengozzi 2013, Medugno 2024.

ing a different axis of relation linking this text with a graphic reportage, *Libia*, co-created by Mannocchi with comics artist Gianluca Costantini and writer Daniele Brolli.³ This work tells a similar story of Libya as border-zone in Mediterranean migrations and does so differently, exploiting the affordances of its medium. It is interesting to note that in the graphic narrative, Mannocchi herself is visually figured almost constantly as a reference point, a mediating subject and expert witness with whom the Italian-speaking reader may establish a relationship of trust. The reader sees her at work, with her range of interlocutors generally named and imaged and their stories entrusted to her through visible dialogue, i.e. speech bubbles. In *Io Khaled*, however, Mannocchi is prominent as a name on the cover but apart from an outline biography on the book's flyleaf and a brief list of thanks, is absent as a subject. There is no biography of Khaled, no outline of Mannocchi's relationship with him (if he exists as an individual) and he is not 'figured' in the way that individual witnesses are in *Libia*.

This suggests a deliberate destabilising in Khaled's life narrative as created or co-created by Mannocchi of "the autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 1989, 11) and of notions of truth in reportage. Between the multiple practices of authorship that life narratives may adopt, a 'pact' is posited in *Io Khaled* which, in openly disrupting the match between the author credited with writing the narrative and the individual speaking as 'I' throughout, asks the reader to activate their own sense of simultaneous distance from and proximity to the individual sharing a challenging life experience and to guard their own responses to Khaled's claim to 'innocence'. Mannocchi's name and reputation also alert the reader to her 'authority' and to the complex relationality of reportage: she is not a transparent filter as scribe of the written narrative but an active subject who herself has interacted as investigator and 'embedded' resident in the border-zone.⁴ The text itself allows the reader no way of knowing for sure whether Khaled is a living individual or not, and whether that matters. Instead, it calls the reader into a relational narrative perhaps aptly identifiable as an "intersubjective autobiography".⁵

3 Costantini and Mannocchi 2019.

4 Mannocchi is a multi-award winning international journalist, writer and film-maker. For a summary profile, see <https://www.festivaldelgiornalismo.com/speaker/francesca-mannocchi> (accessed: 15/12/2025).

5 For discussion of this term in a comparable context, see Whitlock 2006, 8; also Burns 2024.

Khaled introduces himself in the book's prologue as an agent of Mediterranean crossings who asserts his labour in managing and profiting from this trade as the only option to claim some agency within a condition in Libya in the 2010s of absolute deprivation of freedom to act. Located outside a bank as he speaks, Khaled expresses frustration at the young men he employs to organize and transport migrants because of their inefficiency and their cloying reliance on him to support them and their families. He expresses both pity and disdain for the Libyan citizens forced to queue outside the bank to access their limited funds, available to them only at the whim of corrupt government officials and armed guards. Khaled asserts his integrity as a subject in terms of his capacity to claim power in these conditions rather than be subjected to the power struggles of others within and beyond the national space that leave the people of Libya in subalternity. He comments on the money that he has thanks to his trade in humans and that enables him to provide for those he cares for, articulating through the repeated use of the first person subject pronoun that this distinguishes him positively from other Libyans forced to supplicate others for labour, goods or money:

Ma mia madre la faccio vivere come una regina, io. Io posso.

Io in quella banca posso entrare senza aspettare il permesso di nessuno [...]. Il potere che ho l'ho conquistato, si rassegnino (Mannocchi 2019, 6).

Bold assertions of individual agency such as this in the prologue are combined with expressions of regret, loss and vulnerability. For example, commenting on the wealth generated by enabling those he persistently refers to as “negri” to leave Libya, he comments, “Io resto qui. E il prezzo piú alto lo pago restando” (Ibid.: 11). Such statements establish the posture of the speaking “io” of this narrative and invite the reader to respond to the ambivalence of the position of the human trafficker. By enabling an individual subject to express through a first-person narrative and free indirect speech his own and Libya's twenty-first century history, his actions in the present and past, the experiences of himself and those around him (whether migrants or Libyans), Mannocchi presses for a critical questioning of the labour of the trafficker and an urgent appraisal of the condition of Libya. By this means, and drawing upon Judith Butler's (2016) work, I aim to demonstrate that Mannocchi urges a critical questioning also of vulnerability in the context of recent and current practices of south-to-

north Mediterranean crossings. Mannocchi's inscription of Khaled's extended testimony performs complex literary, ethical, and political work itself, and in what follows, I seek to identify this complexity through the lens of the intersecting forms and practices of labour that subtend both this text and the wider condition of Mediterranean migrations.

2. *Khaled's labour*

The vehicle of a first-person life narrative, articulated in the present tense with substantive incursions into the past, facilitates Mannocchi's progressive articulation of the business of 'selling humans' as a sophisticated enterprise reliant on multiple, coordinated forms of expertise, communication and production. A well-defined management structure emerges with Khaled leading his own team, taking instructions directly from a successful trafficker identified as Husen al-Zawawi. Husen's business began with a mandate and financial support from Gaddafi himself, in his infamous unofficial riposte to Italy's trade and security deal with Libya, "Facciamo diventare nera l'Europa", cited in Khaled's account (Mannocchi 2019, 129).⁶ Khaled coordinates the labour of his lower-level operatives, liaising with suppliers of boats and engines and bribing coastguard officers to turn a blind eye to departures.

In the fifth episode of the book, a clear account is assembled of the supply chain and production process that leads to the departure of the loaded boats from the shoreline. Husen instructs Khaled to go to the "stoccaggio merci" where a group of Syrian migrants are being held, load them onto three lorries and await further instructions. He notes that Syrians are prized stock: "Sono quelli piú ricchi, non farli rapire e non farti beccare" (Ibid.: 108). Khaled's work enables the structure and organization of the warehouse to be described, the arrangements for keeping detained passengers fed and watered, the demands of the passengers (described broadly as "il carico"), the principles and pricing structure of provision such as lifejackets. Whilst the migrants wait on the beach in darkness for the moment to embark when the coastguard is absent, Husen

6 During a visit to Italy in August 2010, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi demanded that the EU pay Libya at least 5 billion Euros a year to stop illegal immigration from Africa and avoid Europe 'becoming black'.

and his team go to a restaurant and eat and drink well. Once the migrants wade out to the boat around midnight, there is a strict, racialised division of the load: "i negri" in the hold, along with "un po' di bengalesi e pachistani" and the wealthier Eritreans and Syrians on the deck (Ibid.: 111). Loading takes two hours, after which a Tunisian fisherman is selected to captain the boat in return for free passage, and given a satellite phone and GPS with instructions to call the coastguard if in difficulty. As Husen notes, selecting a migrant as the *scafista* and telling them to call coastguard or Search and Rescue (SAR, hereafter) services if in danger is an effective measure for removing responsibility for drownings and shipwrecks from the trafficking team. Once the boat has moved away from the shore, Husen calculates the profit and confirms this was "un buon carico" (Ibid.: 113).

This detailed account of the trafficking operation is enclosed within a chapter entitled "Come va giù una cosa che muore" that recalls this departure in retrospect. The chapter opens with a first-person narrative of which the 'io' is a Syrian woman, Fouzieh, who describes in the present tense the drowning of her son and herself as a migrant boat sinks shortly after departure from the shore. This narrative is then revealed to be a recurring dream of Khaled's that has disrupted his sleep for three years. He addresses her directly and denies any responsibility for her death but then moves into the account above of the full operation of this departure, including his own concerns about the safety of the crossing in rough November weather. The chapter ends with Husen and his team, including Khaled, following the boat out to sea in their own small boat to check its conditions following a panicked call from the Tunisian captain, only to find the chaotic drownings that Fouzieh describes in Khaled's dream. Husen demands they return to shore since the migrants, once beyond the shoreline, are no longer their responsibility. The chapter closes with Khaled's reflections on his longstanding distrust for the sea and his account of the traffickers returning to shore once the cessation of screaming tells them that the migrants are dead (Ibid.: 115).

The encasement of the account of the efficient labour of migrant trafficking within the expression of Khaled's troubled consciousness of the context and consequences of their labour articulates the ethical tension within the term "human trafficking". It thus indicates one of the ways in which Manocchi's narrative urges reflection on the position of those who organize and profit from undocumented migrant journeys in the context of the demand for

access to Europe prompted by untenable conditions of living in areas of the global South. The insistence of political instability and exploitation, uneven and inequitable development and financial resourcing, armed conflict, poverty, and hunger is figured as the condition underlying both migration and its exploitation. Khaled's response to the story Fouzieh recounts to him in his recurring dream is "Non sei morta per colpa mia" (Ibid.: 108). Whilst his conviction in this statement is radically unsettled by the fact that he recalls her story disrupting his sleep for three years since the incident, his claim of innocence is also supported by the exposure in the narrative of the productive collusion of multiple, contradictory conditions and demands that make the labour of trafficking not only possible but a form of resistance, preferable to complicity and capitulation. As Khaled comments earlier in the book, "Almeno io non mi sono seduto in un ministero, tra i riciclati. Ho scelto il lavoro sporco, sono più onesto" (Ibid.: 56).

The 'recycling' habit, established through a series of civil wars and conflicts in Libya between 2011 and 2020 (and continuing), of reconfiguring political-military factions and their militias and, for Libyan citizens, of adapting to these shifts in order to avoid imprisonment, torture and death, is a target of Khaled's frustration throughout the narrative. He identifies Libyans as chameleons, his own father included, and pitches this instinct to adapt in order to survive as moral-political dishonesty, as opposed to the 'honest' work of trafficking migrants. Likewise, he apprehends his own earlier commitment to more conventionally respectable labour – degree study in engineering and then military action in the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi – as a failed endeavour, proved meaningless by the perpetuation of internal divisions sanctioned by formal national recognition of multiple factions. In an imagined conversation or confession to his deceased older brother, Murad, Khaled locates his sense of abjection, of incapacity to engage in anything other than 'dirty' work, in the legacy of this history of ruthless pursuit of dominion in which Khaled is unavoidably implicated. "Tu eri il martire, io il sopravvissuto" (Ibid.: 132), he tells Murad, voicing the moral superiority that Murad owns by virtue of dying in a good cause, whilst Khaled's bodily labour towards the same cause has become a shameful appendage to his sense of purpose in the world in the absence of genuine socio-political change. To turn his labour, therefore, towards a 'dirty' and lucrative trade offering high demand for services and good profits, in order to secure his dream of building a luxury home in Istanbul and leaving Libya, is

a means to distinguish himself from the “chameleons”. The abjection of participating in a trade that haunts and disgusts him is an act of resistance to the logic of surviving by means of complicity.

3. *The Mediterranean border*

The ‘io’ of Khaled thus functions in Mannocchi’s narrative as a subjectivated human index of the complex and critical condition of the Mediterranean border-zone since the 2010s, revealing it as a zone of “hatred, anger, and exploitation”, as Gloria Anzaldúa eloquently identified border territories in her seminal study (Anzaldúa 1987, 11). It is worth exploring this field of pressures and tensions more exactly in order to appreciate the work that *Io Khaled* does in urging intense, informed engagement with what is routinely presented in political and media discourse as a perpetual ‘crisis’ or ‘emergency’.⁷ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson focus on the contemporary Mediterranean to posit a conceptualization of border as not object but method of inquiry. Drawing upon Balibar’s assertion of the heterogeneity of the border (Balibar 2002, 84), they note its extension from a line on a map to an expansive space in which plural interests and practices both coincide and contest each other: “Today borders are not merely geographical margins or territorial edges. They are complex social institutions, which are marked by tensions between practices of border reinforcement and border crossing” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 3). They further highlight the agency that migrants own and perform in this dense environment:

The metaphor of Fortress Europe drives the political imagination in a too unilateral way onto mechanisms of control and domination. There is a risk of obscuring how the external borders of the European Union are challenged by migrants along the multiple geographical scales of their stretching. [...] Our focus on what we call processes of differential inclusion entails a conviction that the figures who inhabit the world’s borderscapes are not marginal subjects that subsist on the edges of society but central protagonists in the drama of composing the space, time, and materiality of the social itself (Ibid.: 165).

7 Eleanor Paynter cites the observation of Isabella, a social worker in Calabria, that “non si può parlare per anni di emergenza”, underscoring the failure of the language routinely used in border, conflict, and migration contexts to express the lived conditions of unrelenting socio-political instability (Paynter 2024, front matter).

The “processes of differential inclusion” described here refer to Mezzadra and Neilson’s observation that governmental policy and action in the management of migration are aimed not at stopping or limiting migration flows but at selecting which migrants may access Europe and under which conditions. It is notable that the ‘illegal’ management of migration produced by the labour of Khaled and his associates reproduces an analogous principle, differentiating between groups of migrants in terms of wealth, national or ethnic provenance – and thus perceived socio-political capital – in order to enable differentiated levels of physical risk and discomfort during Mediterranean crossings. This reproduction of the labour of management of migration flows overseen by formal European initiatives in unsanctioned practice at the thresholds of the border-zone demonstrates one form of tension in the seascape of the Mediterranean, with processes of identification and exclusion/inclusion actively challenging each other as traffickers enable the journeys that border forces work to disable. In this sense, I would suggest that it is not only migrants who ‘challenge’ the external borders of the European Union; rather, the traffickers who through their labour facilitate migrant crossings are themselves active in this ongoing attrition of European border regimes. As such, they too are ‘central protagonists’ in creating the material actuality of the border. It is this context that corroborates Khaled’s claim to be *innocente*.

Everyday labour at sea in the Mediterranean border-zone further illustrates the “extraterritorial ambiguity” of this border and the potentially fatal consequences of competing or simply overlapping political, legal, military, commercial and humanitarian norms (Stierl 2021, 7). A series of initiatives, such as Fortress Europe then Frontex,⁸ enmeshed with changing political positions in European countries and responding to conflict and crisis in countries to the south and east of the Mediterranean, has seen the enforcement of borders formally and informally sliding between supranational border and maritime forces and national coastguards; also to NGOs, to commercial boats and their crews. The law of the sea – that any vessel goes to the aid of another that is

8 “Fortress Europe” is the term recently used for collective action taken by EU states to create a robust border against migration across the Mediterranean. External factors such as the ‘War on Terror’ from 2001 and the 2015 crisis in Syria prompted increased securitization of the Mediterranean border. At this point the EU border agency, Frontex, which had operated since 2004, was mandated to become a fully operational European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

in danger – and more formal humanitarian SAR missions mean that private, transnational or supranational agents are co-opted into a wider control and securitization enterprise. Their labour in identifying, supporting, and rescuing boats and passengers that are at risk may be offered voluntarily but may come at the cost of failing to complete the work that, for example, commercial vessels are contracted to do. Rescue may not be the end of this lending of labour, given that captains of non-state vessels may then be inculpated for attempting to land passengers identified as ‘illegal’ or refused permission to land. In the latter case, captains and crew may face prolonged periods of caring for significant numbers of people, possibly injured and traumatized. This is now a familiar scenario, which Maurice Stierl identifies as having made of the Mediterranean a “carceral seascape” (Stierl 2021, 1).⁹

A project conducted by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, “Forensic Oceanography”, offers substantive and detailed evidence of this process.¹⁰ Exploring particularly the notorious ‘left-to-die’ boat case of March-April 2011, in which sixty-three migrants lost their lives, they traced the evidence of the circumstances of migrant deaths provided by technologies operating in the water itself, such as satellite imagery, communications from buoys with sensors, signals from migrants’ phones. This allowed them to demonstrate that in a zone in which plural geopolitical power differentials are active, the co-presence of multiple forms of jurisdiction and action in one area may produce a situation in which no agent takes action:

The tension between, and coexistence of, the tendencies of enclosure and freedom in the governance of maritime space has resulted, on the one hand, in a form of unbundled and spatially variegated sovereignty, and on the other, in a governance in motion that seeks to compensate for the impossibility of controlling the entire liquid expanse, by focusing on the control of maritime routes and the mobile people and objects that ply them (Heller and Pezzani 2017, 99-100).

Locating their analysis within the space of the sea, and not only its surface but its depths, enables Heller and Pezzani to draw attention to the misalignment between policy and discourse established on land in and between sovereign states

⁹ See Campesi 2024 on the co-option of the national immigration detention policy in Italy into a wider border control infrastructure.

¹⁰ Heller and Pezzani 2017; see also 2012.

and the actuality of maritime labour in the “liquid” expanse of the Mediterranean Sea itself. “What emerges”, they note, “from these conditions is a form of violence that is diffused and dispersed among many actors and which often [...] operates less through the direct action of a singular actor than through the in-action of many” (Ibid.: 97). Placing this study and its conclusions in relation to Mannocchi’s intersubjective life narrative of Khaled indicates a number of nuances to the interpretations that Khaled’s testimony produces. Most obviously, it underscores Khaled’s rejection of responsibility for specific deaths, such as that of Fouzieh and her son, and frames the action of traffickers as a human (not necessarily humane) response to a call for support – albeit inequitable and often exploitative – whilst governmental and coastguard services remain wilfully oblivious to the clandestine passage of groups of migrants through and beyond the territory of their jurisdiction. Heller and Pezzani’s research also notes the singular significance of the Libya-Italy route in any analysis of Mediterranean migrations since the 2010s, relating in particular to the overturning of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 that boosted migration flows as well as increasing military presence in the Mediterranean of European and NATO operations (Ibid.: 108-9). The further collapse in 2013 of the post-Gaddafi Libyan state prompted again increased flows, as did the conflict in Syria in 2015. It is thus important to see Khaled’s account of becoming and being a people trafficker as an effect of the critically unresolved tensions of Libya’s contemporary history, to which the border pressures imposed from European nations were a contributing factor.¹¹

4. *Agency and Resistance*

The deployment of forensic oceanography by Heller and Pezzani also enables a different critical perspective on the specificity and the limits of the work of a trafficker. The researchers’ painstaking use of multiple technologies to assemble the ‘liquid traces’ of migrants, boats and routes makes the surface and the depth of the sea visible in a way which draws attention to its routine *in*-visibility. Traffickers and their migrant passengers, on the other hand, as the “fetishized figures of ‘illegal immigration’” (De Genova 2013, 1181), are prone to

11 See Tsourapas 2017; also Raeymaekers 2021.

the visibility of the shoreline: police, border patrols, film crews and journalists can in differently-purposed ways generate the spectacle of ‘illegal’ crossings in this liminal space, making familiar to the wider world the bodies of migrants, massed or individual, living or dead. Whilst footage of precarious, overcrowded boats at sea, often shot at a distance and/or from above, is also somewhat familiar, such images may communicate desperation but they occlude the dynamics of approach and retreat, support and withdrawal, that the maritime movements tracked forensically reveal. Sea currents and weather contribute to securing the invisibility of the more immediate and critical dangers to migrants making the crossing. As Heller and Pezzani note:

The very term clandestine, from the Latin *clandestinus*, meaning “secret” or “hidden”, points to their aim to circulate undetected – literally, under the radar; this is also why most crossings begin at night. However, this desire to go undetected is always weighed against the risk of dying unnoticed at sea, as in the “left-to-die boat” case when, in distress, the migrants did every thing they possibly could to be noticed and rescued (2017, 105).

In this precarious condition, the question emerges of who acts for migrants? Traffickers, NGOs on land and sea and SAR vessels respond to the immediate and visible human demand but the more remote action of border forces, along with reception and detention policies of ‘differential inclusion’, may restrict their capacity for sustained action. This is illustrated by the establishment in 2017 of a Libyan rescue zone, under which SAR operations were outsourced to the Libyan coastguard, trained and equipped in large part by the Italian government. Such a transfer of agency afforded the conditions in which, in 2018 and 2019, the then Italian Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, felt empowered to refuse permission to dock in Italy to NGO boats that had rescued migrants from Libya (Heller and Pezzani 2018; Neuman 2023). This offers an apt example of Nicholas De Genova’s comment, drawing attention to how mobility is itself an act of resistance, that “it is instructive to recall that the autonomy of migration and its politics of mobility precede and provoke the state’s politics of immigration control and its spectacle of borders” (2013, 1190). In resisting the politics of control and border enforcement, how much must, or can, the labour of migration be enacted by migrants themselves? And can the activity of traffickers be apprehended as an act of migrant (and anticolonial) solidarity?

In fact, the moments in which migrants call on the labour of others to facilitate their journey are relatively few, for obvious reasons of cost and risk but also

because they can draw on the independent resource of migrant knowledge, travelling as a collective and making decisions based on the shared experience of others who have done the journey before (Heller and Pezzani 2017, 105). As Khaled's account illustrates, whilst he and other traffickers use a dehumanizing discourse ("carico") to distance themselves from the human accountability of facilitating potentially fatal journeys, the migrants who are their customers show themselves to be knowledgeable of their needs and of the risks of the journey. They are also articulate in demanding their limited rights as paying passengers and simply as fellow humans. In other words, contrary to a popular narrative that helpless migrants are ruthlessly exploited by cynical traffickers – "authoriz[ing] the state to gratuitously fashion itself as a paternalistic (indeed, patriarchal)" influence (De Genova 2013, 1191) – Mannocchi, through Khaled, presents a condition in which agency, knowledge, and power are unequally distributed and insecure, and most players in the scene are to some degree subaltern subjects.

A comparable dynamic of oppression and agency has been explored by Judith Butler in terms of vulnerability and resistance. Using police violence against protesters as her object of inquiry, Butler develops an account of how vulnerability can be rethought to prove agentic which has resonance with the position of migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean. She argues that people in a condition of precarity do not become vulnerable at the moment of exposure to risk, as we might assume, but rather that the very condition of precarity itself bespeaks vulnerability. As such, "If we also say that the vulnerability to dispossession, poverty, insecurity, and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance, then it seems we reverse the sequence: we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (Butler 2016, 12).

Considering this assertion firstly in relation to the condition of migrants fleeing conditions of precarity who move and continue to move, despite the known and repeatedly verified risks of journeys both over land and sea, then their persistence can itself be read as an ongoing act of resistance to the geopolitical violence of actively or passively repelling mobility from the south of the Mediterranean to Europe and denying the rights of travellers at sea: "Vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment" (Ibid.: 22). Societies and communities held in precarity by the legacies of colonialism and practices of globalization expose their vul-

nerability, through migration, as a relentless push back against the logic and practice of border security, understood as “a form of violence that is exercised less by effecting a destructive force against a given actor, than by creating the conditions in which the sea becomes a liquid trap and refraining from helping those who are caught in it” (Heller and Pezzani 2017, 108). Key to this reading, following Butler, is the collective dimension of the vulnerability that is experienced, which brings a sharp inflection to the context of Mediterranean migrations, habitually described with large numbers and with language of volume (“mass migration”, “migration flows” etc.). In this context of the spectacle of collective mobility, Butler’s argument that vulnerability can afford agency is compelling:

Political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time. Such collective forms of resistance are structured very differently than the idea of a political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability – this is the masculinist ideal we surely ought to continue to oppose (2016, 24).

Butler’s closing comment here turns my analysis back towards traffickers and to Khaled, who, in media coverage and relatively rare criminal proceedings as well as in Mannocchi’s autobiographical construction of a trafficker, are invariably male and perform a masculinist ideal of invulnerability. Within the panorama of Mediterranean migrations, from vulnerable and resistant migrants to border regimes self-identified as creating a ‘fortress’, where are traffickers in the global South positioned? How is the central role of these shoreline traders in facilitating both mobility and death to be apprehended? The autobiographical story of a Libyan trafficker, written by an Italian journalist deeply familiar with Libya in the 2010s, offers evidence of a particular kind: conventionally ‘unreliable’ in its uncertain position between fact and fiction and in the unverifiable identity of its first person, whilst also complex and intersubjectively compelling in its intimate probing of the subjectivity of the ‘perpetrator’. Khaled can certainly be understood as a subject living in a condition of extreme precarity: Libya in the twenty-first century. This is a collective condition lived also through the individual experience of defeat, bereavement, and disenfranchisement that a life narrative enables to be shared. As such, his vulnerability is both collective and individual.

The account Khaled provides of the prevailing habit in an unstable political environment of seeking invisibility through conforming to the expectations of the currently most powerful offers a conventional vision of vulnerability as

non-agentic. In this context, Khaled frames his work as a human trafficker as agentic, an act of resistance both to the factions and militias that exploitatively hold power and to the majority of citizens who confirm their vulnerability by conforming. On one hand, this is Butler's "masculine ideal" of vanquishing vulnerability by finding strength in exploitation and rejection of the collective. On the other hand, the interior experience that Khaled voices reveals his ethical and emotional attachment to others, and less to his Libyan kinship and community than to the migrants who are performatively described by him as just cargo and denigrated with racist language. Nightmares, memories, interiorized reflections, and crisis moments such as the sinking of the boat transporting Fouzieh and others described above, puncture his rhetoric of rejection with a demonstration of collective vulnerability in the border space of the Mediterranean.

Mannocchi's narrative perhaps challenges the reader to apprehend Khaled's work as an act of resistance which is both individual – resisting the identity of "chameleon" by performing illegal labour that challenges the prevailing Libyan regime – and collective, supporting the mobility of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants by arranging passage for them at a point in the journey where the limits of their own collective knowledge and resources make them reliant on specialist services. At this point, his individual resistance becomes part of migrants' collective resistance, his localized agency enables their agency in remaining mobile. He might be apprehended as an ally to migrants in staging their resistance, but an ally who may facilitate their death and, whatever the outcome of the transaction, will profit financially from a pricing structure founded on the willed exploitation of migrants' vulnerability. It is in this tension that Heller and Pezzani's description of the Mediterranean Sea as "unwilling killer", where "the sea stops being a mute background onto which tactics of border enforcement unfold and becomes a constitutive element of boundary making" (2017, 106) can be applied to Khaled. From the "mute background" of post-2011 Libya, the trafficker asserts his agency in both enacting and challenging that boundary, performing "il coraggio di essere il capo di quello che faccio" (Mannocchi 2019, 99).¹²

12 Khaled is also an "unwilling rapist", in a disturbing episode of his induction by Husen where he witnesses as Husen claims the "regalino" for his work with migrants by raping a girl in a detention centre, tacitly testing Khaled to do the same. Khaled appears distressed by Husen's act, but nevertheless replicates it with another girl. Mannocchi 2019, 154-55. See also Burns 2024, 375.

5. Conclusion

This article has discussed the labour of human trafficking as it is narrated by the voice of Khaled in Mannocchi's narrative. I have placed this in the context of the multi-form and multi-agent practices of labour that populate the Mediterranean Sea which migrants seek to cross and national and supranational bodies to monitor, control, and intervene in. It is worth observing in conclusion that a number of other forms of labour cross this geographical and epistemological space, compounding the sense that Mediterranean migrations are not only a prominent area of discourse and inquiry but also one thick with intersecting energies of human work. Beyond the expertise and physical capability of those operating the range of vessels present in the sea at any one moment, and beyond the land-based labour of policy-making, policing, tracking, monitoring, receiving and supporting, there is a transnational network of often combined labour that reveals the urgency of understanding what this border is and what it does to human subjects. As my sources demonstrate, academic labour is prominent, across multiple disciplines, and it is striking that academic researchers are often developing their understanding through other kinds of labour, such as monitoring, crewing NGO boats, supporting individual migrants. In the wider knowledge economy, journalists are insistently present – as Mannocchi's wider work demonstrates – investigating and communicating accounts of the border that fuel individual and collective imaginaries and inform ethical and political positions across the ideological spectrum. Creative practitioners and artists (again, including Mannocchi) lend their labour in provoking and questioning these imaginaries and interpretations. In all these categories, migrants themselves contribute their active and expert labour.

In all these categories, there are also risks posed by the complexity of the border space itself of becoming implicated in the penetrating operation of border control even while seeking to challenge it. In an environment of such volatility as determines the Mediterranean border, vulnerability is a shared condition that produces both kindness and violence, solidarity and exploitation. The pivotal figure of the troubled and 'unwilling' trafficker, rapist, and killer that is Khaled, described through a complex and internally plurivocal first-person account, presents the possibility to understand intimately and also with critical distance the ways in which vulnerability itself may be mobilized by migrants and those who, variously motivated, support their mobility, as an act of solidarity in precarity or of implicated resistance.

Bibliography

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Balibar, Étienne. 2002. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso.
- Burns, Jennifer. 2013. *Migrant Imaginaries. Figures in Italian Migration Literature*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Burns, Jennifer. 2024. "Telling Lives: Relational Dynamics of Intersubjective Life Narratives of Contemporary Migration Journeys." *The Italianist* 44, no. 2: 368-85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2024.2435102>.
- Butler, Judith. 2016. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, 12-27. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Campesi, Giuseppe. 2024. "Regulating Mobility through Detention: Understanding the New Geography of Control and Containment at the Southern European Border." *Theoretical Criminology* 28, no. 4: 554-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13624806241249665>.
- Costantini, Gianluca, and Mannocchi, Francesca. 2019. *Libia*. Milan: Mondadori.
- De Genova, Nicholas. 2013. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7: 1180-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710>.
- Heller, Charles, and Pezzani, Lorenzo. 2012. "The Left-to-Die Boat." <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat> (accessed: 15/12/2025).
- Heller, Charles, and Pezzani, Lorenzo. 2017. "Liquid Traces: Investigating the Deaths of Migrants at the EU's Maritime Frontier." In *The Borders of "Europe": Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*, edited by Nicholas De Genova, 95-119. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Heller, Charles, and Pezzani, Lorenzo. 2018. *Forensic Oceanography. Mare Clausum. Italy and the EU's undeclared operation to stem migration across the Mediterranean*. Goldsmiths, University of London. <https://content.fo->

rensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2018-05-07-FO-Mare-Clausum-full-EN.pdf (accessed: 15/12/2025).

Khouma, Pap. 1990. *Io, venditore di elefanti*, edited by Oreste Pivetta. Milan: Garzanti.

Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. *On Autobiography*, edited by Paul John Eakin, translated by Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mannocchi, Francesca. 2019. *Io Khaled vendo uomini e sono innocente*. Turin: Einaudi.

Medugno, Marco. 2024. *Literature of the Somali Diaspora: Space, Language and Resistance in Somali Novels in English and Italian*. London: Bloomsbury.

Mengozzi, Chiara. 2013. *Narrazioni contese. Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione*. Rome: Carocci.

Mezzadra, Sandro, and Neilson, Brett. 2013. *Border As Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Neuman, Michaël. 2023. “A Brief History of Rescue Operations in the Mediterranean.” *CRASH, Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires*. <https://msf-crash.org/en/camps-refugees-idps/brief-history-rescue-operations-mediterranean> (accessed: 15/12/2025).

Parati, Graziella. 2005. *Migration Italy. The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Paynter, Eleanor. 2024. *Emergency in Transit: Witnessing Migration in the Colonial Present*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Raeymaekers, Timothy. 2021. “Impermanent Territories: The Mediterranean Crisis and the (Re-)production of the Black Subject.” In *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*, edited by The Black Mediterranean Collective, 117-144. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stierl, Maurice. 2019. *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe*. London: Routledge.

Stierl, Maurice. 2021. “The Mediterranean as a Carceral Seascape.” *Political Geography* 88, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102417>

Tsourapas, Gerasimos. 2017. "Migration Diplomacy in the Global South: Cooperation, Coercion and Issue Linkage in Gaddafi's Libya." *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10: 2367-85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350102>.

Whitlock, Gillian. 2006. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Jennifer Burns is Professor of Italian Studies in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures and Deputy Chair of the Faculty of Arts (External Engagement) at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on Italian literature, cinema and cultural history since WWII and particularly narratives of migration and minoritization in the context of contemporary Italy. Her current project explores the writing practices of transnational authors and the agency of 'world literatures' operating in the peripheries of global literary markets. She is co-editor with Derek Duncan of *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* (2022), cornerstone volume of the 'Transnational Modern Languages' book series (Liverpool University Press) of which she is co-creator/co-editor. She serves on the advisory boards for the journals, *altrelettere*, *Scritture migranti* and *Moderna Språk*.