

The World is perishing, create art

– Aesthetic projects of belonging
in and to ‘the green and pleasant land’
and *mare nostrum*

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Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the thoughtful feedback and encouragement provided by my supervisor, Peo Hansen throughout the thesis writing process. During the thesis-writing seminar, I was fortunate to have Andrea Nold and Inna Sinersaari as discussants, who were willing to put extra effort into understanding what were then unclear and half-formed ideas. They pressed me to more clearly articulate my project and their feedback was invaluable. Hammam Skaik's and Giulia Stradiotti's advice on the nuances of meaning of Arabic and Italian terms, cultural contexts and histories opened the door to a depth that I would not have been able to access without them. Any credit towards organization of this thesis belongs solely to Laura Fürsich, who's academic rigour raised the quality of this document beyond my aspirations. My family, Ann and Sadie, thank you for your support and encouragement throughout this process. My extended families and hosts, thank you to Eman, Hammam, Jasmin, Inna and Christopher. Lastly, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to the teaching staff at REMESO and my classmates in the EMS MA Program, who have been figures of inspiration, valuable interlocutors and constructive critics in the ongoing development of my ideas.

A note on the text

Included in this text are thirty-three images, which hopefully will make for lighter reading. The relevant credits are included in the list of figures below. Unless otherwise indicated, all photos were taken by me. I would highly encourage any reader to browse this text in digital form, as the images are not in all cases of sufficient quality to be legible when printed. All images are the copyrighted material of the artists, news organizations or political organizations from which they were drawn. Also embedded within the text are numerous citations originating from non-English sources. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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Introduction

This thesis addresses aesthetic responses to the bordering of place in the context of the referendums in the United Kingdom in 2016 and Italy's Veneto in 2017. As such, this study intersects with historical, political and aesthetics approaches to belonging. The aesthetic genealogies and practices considered herein exist on a continuum from the spectacular (Debord, 1994; Baudrillard, 2008; De Genova, 2013) to the disidentificatory (Muñoz, 1999), erasing or presenting the specific, material conditions in which exclusionary politics are staged. Aesthetic practice is treated herein as *spectacle* when it erases violence, and *disidentificatory* when it works to carve out a hybrid space of survival. As a consequence, ongoing violence, both physical and symbolic is at the heart of this analysis, with all aesthetic practices articulating social relationships (Debord, 1994, Thesis VII) and some considered herein interpreting Walter Benjamin's dictum of *fiat ars pereat mundus*¹ as a call to action against, and others as a legitimization of, the *violent* status quo.

The genealogy of these divergent interpretations is detailed historically in the work of various artists as they engage with the aesthetic referents that define chapters two and three, culminating in the practices two principal artists, Rizwan Ahmed & Safet Zec. Globally, the aesthetic practices of the principal artists under consideration can be grouped under an aesthetic ontology of *survival*, disidentifying with the debasement of minoritarian subjects in politics. Those aesthetics to which they are opposed aestheticize political projects of violence, conforming to Debord's definition of spectacle as the peak of ideology, manifesting "the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of *real* life" (Debord, 1994, Thesis CCXV). Critically, the aesthetic practices of the principal artists illustrated herein enable and realize the material and/or symbolic survival of the minoritarian subject amidst their violent erasure from the public sphere.

The chapter-contexts of the UK and Veneto were selected based on the common theme of referendums concerning migrants: their repatriation, regularization, scapegoating, and demonization. Further, the diversity of the chapter-contexts of a sovereign nation (UK) within a supranational union (EU) and a 'would-be' autonomous region within Italy was appealing for its

¹ This concept is further elaborated on p. 14

variety of perspectives, differential engagement with governance structures and sociocultural conjunctures. Critical contexts of history and historicism as well as contemporary debates of exclusion from belonging inform the aesthetic practices of the principal artists, who refract these shared historico-socio-political contexts of which it is relevant to present a brief summary here.

Chapter two's *Englistan*, presents Riz MC²'s visual-acoustic vision of 'actually-existing-multiculturalism' in the UK released in the midst of the referendum campaign on the UK's 'exit' from the European Union (hereafter, Brexit). This campaign was characterized by the presentation of migrants as a drain on society, the alleged potential for the reallocation of massive funds to the National Health Service as a consequence of exiting the European Union and played on questions of a preserving a 'threatened' British identity (Virdee & McGeever, 2017; Weiler, 2017). In exploring the vision of 'belonging' invoked in Riz's album, the cipher of a 'green and pleasant land' is the principle aesthetic referent.

Chapter three's *Exodus* presents Safet Zec³'s visual testament to the agency and suffering of migrants coming to Italy in the midst of the autonomy referendum campaigns in Veneto and Lombardia. This referendum campaign was a part of the longstanding processual provocation of the Italian national government by the regional governments of Veneto and Lombardia (Ruzza and Schmidtke, 1993; Fasone, 2017), both governed by elements of the once-secessionist *Lega Nord* now rebranded for national appeal as the *Lega*. The regional *Liga Veneta* and *Liga Lombardia* referendums of October 22nd, 2017 among other things, advocated for an end to refugee reception, the exclusion of migrants from the region, increasing militarization of the maritime borders and played on questions of preserving a 'threatened' regional identity (Piris, 2017). In exploring the vision of 'belonging' invoked in Zec's exhibition, the cipher of '*mare nostrum*' is the principle aesthetic referent.

While one 'frame' of these aesthetic practices are given political-territorial units and their referendums, minimal attention will be afforded to political debates, nor are the intervening artists restricted to those of a particular citizenship or ethnic identity. Instead, this thesis catalogues aesthetic practices that 'enact citizenship' expansively (Isin, 2008), and in so doing reveal intersections of class, race, coloniality, immigration and labour. These aesthetic practices,

² For legibility, clarity, and in keeping with the artist's various performance names, throughout this thesis in text-discussions of Riz MC's (aka Rizwan Ahmed's) work will refer to him as 'Riz'.

³ In contrast, Safet Zec is here referred to as 'Zec', given his wider acceptance by that name.

taking place as they do in environments where the ‘deixis of belonging’ (Billig, 2010) among ‘us’ and to ‘our’ *demos* has been reduced to a tyranny of the electoral majority, are essential for understanding the contestation of the sphere of the political (Jonsson, 2004) when politics has been reduced to spectacle (Baudrillard, 2008; Cushion & Lewis, 2016). This spectacle has been defined by Baudrillard as “a double symbolic murder...” where, “everything takes the form of an image, while the real disappears behind the profusion of images” (2008, p. 41). The disappearing ‘real’ to which Baudrillard alluded is in this thesis represented by the ongoing structural violence to which minoritarian subjects are exposed. The exceptional character of the work of the principal artists considered in this thesis stands in opposition to the ‘spectacular’ present in the simultaneous mediatization and erasure of violence and regressive deployment of nostalgia present in the work of certain of their contemporaries. By situating their work within long genealogies of aesthetic practice and meaning, this thesis will demonstrate the resilience to cooption of such disidentificatory aesthetic practices, which offer “critical resources with which to oppose the growing pressure to depoliticize life” (Demos, 2013 p. 247). Such work presents the promise to transcend present conjunctures of exclusion, repression and “move away from the familiar spectacle of misery” (*Ibid*, p. 249) and envision alternative futures through an aesthetic representation of the present.

Chapter structure and outline

The aesthetic performance of belonging is critical in such conjunctures where political-subjects have been isolated as ‘subjects of politics’, whose inclusion within the state (‘right-to-have-rights’) is debated publicly in sales-driven media (Cushion & Lewis, 2016). Chapter one explores the theoretical underpinnings of the performance of the ‘politics of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011) thematically, approaching the theory through belonging, temporality, memory, disidentification and hybridity. Chapters two and three take a genealogical approach to the aesthetic referents of ‘a green and pleasant land’ and *mare nostrum*, following these referents through the work of various artists in history, leading to the principal artists.

These aesthetic referents are saturated with meanings and affective significations of belonging, and thus do not accord to Lévi-Strauss’ (1987, p. 63) definition of a ‘floating

signifier' as 'without a referent or a signified'. Instead the genealogical relationship is far more dialogic, confirming better to Laclau's (1996) reinterpretation of the signifier as necessarily ambivalent, but crucially not equivocal, nor ambiguous (p. 36). That these aesthetic referents signal different meanings depending on their framing and the audience to which they are in the process of communicating with is for Laclau, embedded within relations of power and hegemony. Yet, as Eco would caution, overemphasis on the referent at the expense of the interpretant (in this case, the principle artists) privileges the '*thing-for-us*' in lieu of the '*thing-in-itself*' (1976, p. 151-2). While there is fertile complementarity between the semiotic and Marxist approaches to the referent as a cultural-ideological unit, Lewis argues that they both restrict the referent "to the realm of culture and reject any ontological claims for referentiality" (1979, p. 473). This denial of the ontological potential of referentiality does not accord with Muñoz's argument for the worldmaking potential of disidentificatory aesthetic practice (1999, p. 195) of the likes of Riz's *Englistan* and Zec's *Exodus*. Thus, the aesthetic referents' presence in chapters two and three "as an absence, an unfulfilled reality" (Laclau, 1996, p. 44) is primarily a contextual key for understanding the *survivalist* aesthetic practices of Riz and Zec, and secondarily a cipher for the exclusionary politics of belonging with which they disidentify.

In selecting artists to include alongside Riz and Zec in chapters two and three, preference has been given to artists whose aesthetic practices engage with the relevant aesthetic referent, its contextual histories of dominance, ethics of resistance and whose approach(es) demand a redefinition of the space of the political. There is fruitful overlap across the chapters in the tactics of appropriation of aesthetic referents, instrumentalized as rhetorical and metaphorical weapons, and the contestation of their histories, all of which form a part of the 'politicisation of aesthetics' to contest the 'aestheticization of politics' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 242).

The principal artists, Riz Ahmed and Safet Zec, were selected for their hybrid aesthetic practices, self-consciously addressing the exclusion from decision-making, racialization, and disempowerment migrants face in their respective territories; in particular, their work bears upon and engages critically with discourses of exclusion of the relevant referendums. As such, their engagement with the aesthetic referents of a 'green and pleasant land' and *mare nostrum* in the midst of these referendums are exemplars of a particular and "telling instance" (Elgin, 2000, p. 222) of the aesthetic referent within their respective genealogies. These 'instances' (re)present symbols in a transgressive metaphorical play that encourages the viewer to interrogate the

reference, this iteration of it, the circumstances producing it and its significance for the audience (Elgin, 2000).

The aesthetic referents were selected based on their wide purchase across ideological stripes, resonance in the work of the principal artist, as well as their relevance to the historical and contemporary exclusion of migrants from the ‘right to have rights’ in each context. The foreground in chapters two and three of this thesis belongs to the voices, installations, lyrics, images of the principle artists, whose diverse aesthetic practices critically engage with boundaries of belonging *in* and *to* the nation, its iconographies, and most importantly, those who exploit them to exclude. Their performative and mixed media works are given primary consideration as theoretical, critical and aesthetic interventions in the projects of belonging activated around each referendum. These plastic, contested and revisionist aesthetic projects of belonging are linked through the aesthetic referents, that articulate contested genealogies of meaning in each chapter-context. Two leading epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, speak to the contestation of and claims to ownership over a particular aesthetic referent as a proxy for the processes of exclusion and rights claims in to each referendum-case. In order to illustrate the breadth of the use of these aesthetic referents, one part of the leading epigraphs is credited to the relevant principle artist, with the other taking a divergent view as to the meaning and instrumentalization of the aesthetic.

These two analytical chapters centre the practice of the principal artists and delve into the diverse translations and articulations of the aesthetic referents historically, based on their relevance to and contrast with the present usage. By tracing a selected genealogy of the aesthetic referents, as well as any other aesthetic heritage invoked, challenged or ‘ab-used⁴’ (Spivak, 2012) by the principal artist, each chapter seeks to contextualize the competing chains of signification and meaning constitutive of belonging *in* and *to* each referendum-place.

The two principal artists and chapters presented in this thesis share a critical engagement with the politics of their respective contexts, by presenting alternative visions of belonging *in* and *to* those places through various aesthetic media. Hedetoft & Hjort (2002), in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Postnational Self*, define these ‘spaces of contestation’ as “a political and cultural field of global contestation, anywhere between ascriptions of belonging and self-

⁴ Elaborated further on p. 16

constructed definitions of new spaces of culture, freedom and identity” (p. x). In keeping with the dialectal play of ascriptions and self-constructions of belonging they point to, throughout this thesis ‘belonging’ is represented as belonging *in* and *to* ‘x’ imagined and interpretive community (Anderson, 1983; Said, 1983). These affective signifiers of ‘in’ and ‘to’ have always had extrajudicial significance – in the case of these referendums; a notion of who belongs ‘in’ ‘our’ country is a double deixis, reifying assumptions about the composition of the *demos* and constraining its sphere of applicability.

These two constraints of the imagined composition of the *demos* and its territorial extent of the nation is a function of what Michael Billig (2010, p. 38) in *Banal Nationalism* has described as the collective remembering and forgetting that constitutes the nation. As a consequence, aesthetic imaginaries of belonging are “always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity” (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 12). Be it a ‘Windrush’ of migrants from the empire upon which the sun would never set or those migrants following all roads that lead back to Rome, aesthetics of empire have been differentially deployed to enable and to restrict the access to rights of its former subjects.

The tension of the ‘politics of belonging’ *in* and *to* stands also for the principle artists’ engagement with the aesthetic referents that define their respective chapters. By engaging with these referents in their practices, these artists establish their participation ‘in’ a dialogue of ‘mediation’ with a temporal dimension, from the referents first appearance to its inevitable future forgetting, with all the ‘accrued and fragmented meanings’ acquired and lost through its symbolic transfer (Deleuze, 1995, p. 125). The choice of how ‘to’ engage with these referents is their imposition of a particular reading of the *substance* of that belonging; (re)defining it and (re)presenting it to their respective publics.

Although both referents impinge upon the imagined space of the nation, as chapters two and three will show, their aesthetic genealogies trace unique concatenations of meaning in different media. Therefore, to present chapters two and three in a homogenous structure and form would erase the particularity of Riz’s acoustic, poetic and visual engagement with the principally *lyric* referent of ‘green and pleasant land’ and Zec’s visual, spatial and poetic engagement with the principally *visual* referent of *mare nostrum*. While Riz directly alludes to ‘green and pleasant land’ in the title track of his 2016 *Englistan* album, Zec’s engagement with the aesthetic referent of *mare nostrum* is far more implicit, requiring a greater familiarity with the politics of

representation of shipwrecks in Italy since the 2013 launch of the Italian government's Operation Mare Nostrum (Tazzioli, 2015; Musaró, 2017). This subtlety is not necessarily limiting of Zec's inclusion within the genealogy of the referent, as both his and Riz's work nevertheless conform to Elgin's (2000) reading of an exemplar as a 'telling instance' of a symbol, that requires interpretation. This interpretation includes the 'framing of context, in order to draw attention to particular aspects of the exemplar'. This framing by the artists' is considered at the outset of chapters two and three and is also one of my principle considerations as an author. Given the long histories of these referents and the oft-constituent ambiguity of aesthetic choices, the nature of the principal artists engagement with the referent can only be explicit when the author deigns to indicate it as such and the audience is capable of detecting it (Irwin, 2001). Further, to which *particular* instance of the referent within its genealogy the artists engage with is unclear and aside from the focus on disidentification as it is theorized here. Though direct references in Riz's and Zec's are explored when relevant, of principle consideration is how their work represents belonging as it relates to the aesthetic referent in question. If in Riz's work the necessary condition of internal similarity is satisfied by textual comparison of like with like, and the sufficient condition of authorial intent is satisfied by his statements as to his aspirations for his practice; then so too for Zec. The difference in allusion between the two practices and their respective aesthetic referents is not then one of degree, but of form (Irwin, 2001). As a consequence, the analysis in chapters two and three differs in structure as they each "effect a chain of reference whose geometry is unique" (Elgin, 2000, p. 224), but they share an underlying symbolic engagement with the contested histories of the referents, and their instrumentalization in political projects of belonging.

Chapter One: Theoretical grounding

Aesthetics, belonging and temporality

Both of the referendums referred to above were presented to their respective publics in the media as questions of the definition of belonging to ‘their’ community that implicitly (and often explicitly) addressed the incorporation or exclusion of migrants and refugees (Virdee & McGeever, 2017; Piri, 2017). These discourses of exclusion preceded the referendums but were appropriated by the ultimately successful campaigns by reference to imagined and interpretive communities, histories and territories (Anderson, 1983; Said, 1983) and drew on local as well as transnational currents of nativism and xenophobia (Bhambra, 2016). As Neyer and Joerges (1997) argue, the ‘deficiencies of national democracies make them systematically predisposed to disregarding the interests of the disenfranchised’ (p. 273). The associated ‘stigma’ attached to the undifferentiated figure of the migrant/refugee in these referendum discourses “pressed [upon migrants and refugees] to recognize the communal verdict of their imperfection and thus inferiority” (Bauman, 2016, p. 41). In an environment where migrants and refugees are the monolithic and undifferentiated ‘subject of politics’, openly objectified in debate, rather than ‘political subjects’ with attendant rights and responsibilities; to engage in politics is to implicitly accept the premise that one’s inclusion in the ‘right-to-have-rights’ is up for debate. Riz, in an interview discussing *Englistan* elegantly phrased this impasse as “Debating multiculturalism is like debating whether or not people like me should exist. Well fuck off, 'cos we do. So get past that word and start to understand us” (Ahmed, 2016d). Furthermore, the exclusion from participation in these referendums was compounded by residency and citizenship requirements, and the minority status of the groups targeted, making any attempt to assert one’s rights in the prescribed frame of politics decidedly moot (Castles & Davidson, 2000, p. 147). Aesthetic practice, by contrast, is not circumscribed by the sphere of activity of everyday politics but can

address itself to the larger sphere of belonging in and to the political⁵, without requiring an explicit standard of political power for its practitioners⁶.

The willful neglect in this paper of the political arguments advanced during the respective referendum campaigns is not then to be considered a withdrawal from the ‘pragmatic’ sphere of politics into the ‘utopian’ sphere of aesthetics, but supportive of Stefan Jonsson’s (2008) contention that “the arts are always politically charged, they are always *in* politics” (p. 27, emphasis in orig.). To read these referendums backwards from the final vote through each scandal, claim and controversy of their campaigns would “reproduce the gestures of power” (Jonsson, 2004, p. 67) with the misleading veneer of ‘fact’, yet without the “suppressed aspects of ongoing political and cultural processes” (*ibid*, p. 61). Instead, this thesis, by focusing on aesthetic performances of belonging, recognizes that while both politics and aesthetics exist within the larger space of the political, aesthetics is able to present “correctives of the political imagination and testimonials of its shortcomings” (Jonsson, 2008, p. 193) *concretely* in a way that politics does not and cannot. Furthermore, these aesthetic representations of belonging *as it is* and imaginaries of *what it can be* presented in Riz’s and Zec’s practices are not confined to the ‘always-already-present’ requirement of disempowered minoritarian subjects to be ‘in the live’. This ‘burden of liveness⁷’, of being required to perform their circumscribed, aestheticized and stigmatized ethnic roles only ever in ‘the now’ is elegantly defined by Riz in his contribution to *The Good Immigrant*,

As a minority, no sooner do you learn to polish and cherish one chip on your shoulder, it’s taken off you and swapped out for another. The jewellery of your struggles is forever on loan, like the *Koh-i-Noor*. You are intermittently handed this necklace of labels to hang around your neck, neither of your choosing nor making, both constricting and decorative. (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 159-60)

However, Riz’s definition does not only illustrate the oppressive confinement of minoritarian subjects to being in the present. His translation of the individual subject’s struggle to belong, to the particular historical dispossession represented by the reference to the *Koh-i-*

⁵ I am indebted to Jonsson for this formulation, for further elaboration see: Jonsson (2004) particularly pp 59-61 & Badiou (1985).

⁶ However, arguments have been made that class-position, as well as access to capital are strongly correlative of artistic-political practice, see Yuval-Davis, N. (2008) & Ahmed, R. (2017)

⁷ For a further elaboration, see Muñoz (1999), p. 189.

Noor diamond highlights a practice of disidentification that is central to the arguments elaborated in this thesis. Rather than only cataloguing minoritarian grievances, Riz's simile reclaims the history denied to the minoritarian subject and deploys a disidentificatory critique that "takes place *in the future and in the present*," (Muñoz, 1999, p. 200) liberating the disempowered minoritarian subject from their ideological confinement in present and claiming their rights to historical subjectivity to inform an alternative vision of the future (Butler, 1993, p. 144). By presenting in the discussion of their work the 'always-already-contested' belonging to these political spaces in the selected genealogies of the aesthetic referents, the artists own disidentificatory practices are situated in territorial, historical and symbolic contexts and their performative force for enacting citizenship is elucidated (Isin, 2008). Yet, as Benjamin would caution, "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (Benjamin, 1968, Thesis VI).

Benjamin's discussion of the Futurist manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war is also illuminating of the disidentificatory approach employed in this thesis. When Benjamin charged Marinetti specifically and the Futurists more generally of 'aestheticizing politics', in describing the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia as 'the world's only hygiene' (Marinetti, 1935), Benjamin summarized their position by coining a Latin maxim: *fiat ars pereat mundus* 'let art be created, though the world perish'. Benjamin did so in indirect playful allusion to the Kantian precept, *fiat justitia pereat mundus* 'let justice be done, though the world perish'. His parodic reading of the Futurist position instrumentalized a philosophical-aesthetic referent (in this case Kant's (1795) maxim from *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*) and transformed it to serve his purposes. The relation in this thesis between Riz and Zec and the aesthetic referents whose histories they instrumentalize is of a similar nature, where "the words of the master become the site of hybridity [and a] sign of spectacular resistance" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 104). Though these histories have at times lent themselves to Benjamin's classification of 'let art be created, though the world perish', given the variable word order of Latin (Spevak, 2010), and the aesthetic licence of communicability and comprehensibility afforded to parody, the approach of the principal artists can be said to present an alternative reading of *fiat ars, pereat mundus* as: 'the world is perishing, create art'. Thus, their aesthetic practices, in "undermining primordialist and essentializing versions of community-place equalization" (Steyn, 2014, p. 12), excavate the 'dustbins of history' to renew "the historical potential of objects as possible pasts that point to

alternate futures” (*Ibid*, p. 20). In taking a holistic view of the genealogies of meaning variously attached to the aesthetic referents and proposing realist, creative, and inclusive visions of belonging, Riz and Zec’s practices engage with history to imagine alternative futurities.

This thesis takes a twofold approach to the temporality of the ‘always-already-contested’ history Benjamin refers to: first, following a selected linear chronology of the aesthetic referents and their “plasticity as cultural objects” (Agier, 2016, p. 168) up to the disidentificatory practices of Riz’s and Zec’s work; and second, by reading aesthetic practices in the present that nostalgically ‘celebrate antiquity, but forget historical recency’ (Billig, 2010, p. 38) as instances of the historical revisionism that Benjamin warned against. Hatherley’s *The Ministry of Nostalgia* provides a useful working definition of nostalgia for the purposes of the second approach to temporality, in his formulation, nostalgia is “an exercise in pervasive national self-flattery...[where] the nation and its imperial periphery [are] regarded as strongly and indelibly linked...[the referent] returns as a rupture; an aesthetic warped by the intervention of forgetting, vague recollection...running together moments that didn’t coincide” (2016, p. 99, 31). Hatherley’s book does not treat nostalgia as some neutral and diffuse cultural force, but uses it as a hermeneutic, to trace “the ways in which [nostalgia] has been used as a weapon and a shibboleth across the political spectrum” (2016, p. 12)

Disidentification, memory and violence

The principle theoretical grounding for connecting Riz’s and Zec’s aesthetic practices to the aesthetic referents of ‘a green and pleasant land’ and *mare nostrum* respectively is José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) theory of disidentification. Disidentification, in Muñoz’s formulation is practiced at the point of tension between constructivist and essentializing understandings of identity, which is “the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation” (1999, p. 6) In critically engaging with the study of “performativity of *or* in performance” (*Ibid*, p. 200, emphasis in orig.) of queers of colour, Muñoz presents disidentification first and foremost as a survival strategy between *assimilation* and *anti-assimilation*. The impossibility of either option has been described by Michel Agier as ‘the identity trap’ confining minoritarian subjects, emerging from which “makes it possible to

focus a contemporary attention on *contexts and processes* – possibly metaphorical, mimetic, ludic, parodic or aesthetic – of today’s *languages of emancipation*” (Agier, 2016, p 135, my emphasis). Connecting Agier’s ‘third-way’ of ‘languages of emancipation’ to disidentification as a process for relating to contexts of national belonging, Muñoz’s theory presents disidentification as “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology... this working “on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (1999, p. 11-12). It is in this vein that this thesis approaches the aesthetic referents of ‘green and pleasant land’ and *mare nostrum* as ‘rhetorical weapons’ in the hands of Riz and Zec respectively, much in the same way that Aimé Césaire’s colonial subject in *Discours sur le colonialisme* “uses the canonical French writer, François Rableais, to criticize French racists” (Dzero, 2011, p. 104). By tracing a contextual genealogy of these referents as elements of ‘dominant ideologies’, this thesis connects Riz’s and Zec’s disidentificatory ‘ab-use’ (Spivak, 2012, p. 3) of these referents in their aesthetic practices to longer trajectories of contested belonging in and to their respective contexts, which “occupy such sites and to subject them to a democratizing contestation in which the exclusionary conditions of their production are perpetually reworked” (Butler, 1993, p. 76-7). Spivak’s (2012) definition of the prefix ab- in ‘ab-use’, as “a motion away” and “agency, a point of origin,” “supporting,” as well as “the duties of slaves” (p. 3-4) illustrates the tangled necessity, trap and potentiality of these referents when activated by the principal artists under consideration here. Spivak’s potentiality finds its outlet in the memories that Riz and Zec’s practices invoke, “memor[ies] that must extend the awareness that all national rootedness in the West is rooted first of all in the memory of the displaced” (Derrida, 1994, p. 83).

Riz’s and Zec’s work performs the ‘politics of belonging’ in opposition to the politics of violent nostalgia, and seeks to rescue ‘the dead, tradition’s content and its receivers’ from servile appropriation as a ‘tool of the ruling classes’ (Benjamin, 1968, Thesis IV). Thus, the symbolic power attributed in this thesis to the artists’ appropriation of aesthetic referents is twofold, rooted in their critical engagement with canonical cultural motifs and in their testimony of the lived experiences of trauma in ‘the real’ (Butler, 1993, p. 143); both more enduring and imaginative than the debasing politics of their respective presents. At stake in these (re)definitions of the borders of belonging in and to dominant culture, in a climate of violence against minorities, is being erased as a minoritarian subject. As such, their aesthetic practices are first and foremost motivated by symbolic and material survival, while also being critical (Muñoz, 1999). The

disidentificatory aesthetic practice's *survivalist* nature is all the more apt when considering the violence that these disempowered and racialized 'subjects of politics' experienced during referendum campaign periods and continue to experience in their aftermaths. As such, disidentificatory critiques undermine the notion that such open discussions of the belonging of particular groups does not have material (and often deadly) consequences outside of voting booths. As Virdee & McGeever (2017) and Burnett & the Institute of Race Relations (2017) note, in the British context the well-documented violence inflicted on minoritarian subjects during and after the referendum campaign drew on a "latent well of racism [that] could be activated by the production of an appropriately coded language about immigration" (Virdee & McGeever, 2017, p. 7). In the Italian context, the long debate around migrant arrivals by sea has come to such a point that the pretense of search and rescue has been completely abandoned in the latest Frontex naval operation, 'Triton' (EU Commission, 2014; Tazzioli, 2016). Further, the acts of intimidation and violence directed towards migrants and minorities in Veneto, as well as throughout Italy, draw back to irredentist and fascist enforced homogenization of a heterogenous body politic (Schnapp, 1996; Antifa Italia, 2018). Herein lies the critical interposition of disidentificatory practice within a climate of exclusionary appeals to the *demos*, and the justification for my use of the term minoritarian subject throughout this thesis. As the violence towards minorities, new or long-established around these referendums attests, the public debate around any group's belonging to the *demos* puts at risk all those who cannot conceal themselves invisibly as members of the *ethnos*, and further positions these minoritarian subjects closer toward the point of sacralization and vulnerability (Agamben, 1998).

Hybridity and the principle artists' biographies

These 'strangers' who purport to speak for the 'strangers in our midst' (Bauman, 2016) are liable to being relegated to a constrained form of minoritarian subjectivity that confines their space of critique to their 'own' community as some fragmented subset of circumscribed belonging rather than the greater audience to which they address their work. This negative ascription of alterity-in-hybridity, or what Bhabha (2007) termed "the docile body of difference" (p. 73) acts in tandem with the 'burden of liveness' detailed above. However, as Césaire's

Discours illustrates, *hybridity*, when “acknowledged and put to use, empowers the subaltern” (Dzero, 2011, p. 104). As such, this thesis focuses on the exhibitions and practices rather than artists and biographies, to avoid classifying their work as that of ‘pacified’ hybrid subjects, which can be relegated to a binary ‘identity trap’ of *antiassimilationist – assimilationist* that ultimately maintains the stasis of the status quo. In so doing, this thesis seeks to avoid

the trap of identity politics which assumes the same positioning and identifications for all members of the grouping, and thus each member can, in principle, be a ‘representative’ of the grouping, and an equal contributor to the collective narrative – which, of course, is virtually never the case (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 16).

As Butler (1993) presciently warned, “If through its own violences, the conceits of liberal humanism have compelled the multiplication of culturally specific identities, then it is all the more important not to repeat that violence” (p. 80). Riz, continuing his extended metaphor of the necklace of ethnic expectations quoted above addressed this confining classification in his evolving work as an actor:

Portrayals of minorities worked in stages...
Stage One is the two-dimensional stereotype – the minicab driver/terrorist/cornershop owner. It tightens the Necklace.
Stage Two is the subversive portrayal, taking place on ‘ethnic’ terrain but aiming to challenge stereotypes. It loosens the Necklace.
And Stage Three is the Promised Land, where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. In the Promised Land, I’m not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. In the Promised Land, my name might even be Dave. In the Promised Land, there is no Necklace. (Ahmed, 2016a, p. 160)

The *invocation* of an artist’s race, national origin or faith in my position as a commentator is nothing less than the reapplication of ‘the Necklace’ they have fought to choose *when* and *under what circumstances* to wear. That is not to say that this position seeks to erase the historical specificity of their work as artists by reference to some ‘diversity of cultures’ that is little more than dispossession masquerading as multiculturalism (Agier, 2016, p. 97). In practice what emerges in this thesis is quite the opposite. As the following discussions of *Englistan* and *Exodus* will show, their aesthetic practices and words speak volumes more than their biographies as artists should. As Muñoz (1999) has argued, the disidentifying subject, through their performative practice, resists confinement to their “horizons of experience [that] have been debased and stigmatized within the dominant channels of representation. By refusing to simply

invoke identity, and instead to *connote* it, [they] refuse to participate in a particular representational economy” (p. 165, my emphasis). Thus, the analysis in chapter one and of *Englistan* turns on both exegesis of aesthetic practices as well as interviews with Riz. In contrast however, chapter two relies overwhelmingly on exegesis of Zec’s *Exodus* exhibition, as the artist is wont to speak, write, or be interviewed on the subject of his art.

Chapter Two: All for a ~~green~~ mean and pleasant land

“On this little island/Where we’re all surviving/Politeness mixed with violence/This is England... Try to make the best of what’s bad/That’s why we wave the flag/Knee deep in the field of mud with 63 million screaming fans/All for a *green and pleasant land*/All for a *mean and pleasant land*/ All for a *mean and pleasant land*”⁸

– Rizwan Ahmed aka “Riz MC”, *Englistan*, 2016

“Why are their terrorists on our streets today? ... Don't people get it, this is happening up and down *our Green and pleasant land*, Feral inbred raping Muslim men hunting in packs preying on our children, this will be coming to a town near you soon”⁹

– Darren Osborne, *note left in the van used in the 2017 Finsbury Park Mosque attack*

The first of the epigraphs opening this chapter is taken from the eponymous title track of 2016’s *Englistan*, which artist Riz described as “an unflinching portrayal of multiculturalism not as a buzzword, but as lived experience” (Ahmed, 2016b). The second epigraph comes from a note left by Darren Osborne, the driver in the June 19th, 2017 van attack on congregants of the Finsbury Park Mosque in North London that killed Makram Ali and seriously injured nine others. The two contrasting visions of the contemporary United Kingdom¹⁰ find their spatial overlap in the ‘motley, polyglot space’ of London (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000) and their symbolic appeals to a *green and pleasant land*. The genesis of this referent to the present divergent interpretations of national belonging and membership reveals a contested history of belonging to what constitutes ‘Britishness’, one that is embedded in empire, struggles for recognition as members of the national body, political representation, xenophobia and exclusion (Bhabra & Riley, 2017). As such, references to a ‘*green and pleasant land*’ offer a historical code and proxy for drawing out aesthetics of belonging and exclusion in the UK, and artistic approaches to, and engagements with, this hotly-contested national symbol.

Aesthetic representations of the belonging to the nation in the United Kingdom are plastic and changeable, continually subject to contestation, revision, and change. Riz’s 2016 sophomore album, *Englistan* variously engages with exclusion from the ‘imagined community of the nation’

⁸ (my emphasis)

⁹ (my emphasis)

¹⁰ Though the aesthetic practices highlighted in this chapter variously refer to England and Britain, for consistency I use the shortened official name of the United Kingdom, hereafter UK. However, I have not changed the original use of any reference.

(Anderson, 1983), by recourse to mimicry (Bhabha, 1984), parody and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). *Englistan* presents a vision of belonging that is hybrid, drawing on established aesthetic themes from the British canon in its fullest sense – that is, inclusive of the lived experiences of its colonial subjects as well as its literary canon. This chapter will draw principally on



Figure 1 *Englistan* (Album cover), Riz MC, 2016

interviews with Riz Ahmed and the texts and videos of ‘Englistan’ and ‘I Ain’t Bein Racist But...’ from 2016’s *Englistan*. By following a selective genealogy of references to ‘*a green and pleasant land*’ invoked in the title track, we can better apprehend the mobilization of cultural referents as symbolic resources which present a “warts and all” (Ahmed, 2016c) aesthetic vision of belonging in and to the British empire-state (Bhabra, 2016) beyond mono-, or multiculturalism.

Background to the album’s composition

The climate of the ‘Brexit’ referendum is notable for its vitriol and violence, two aspects of a common phenomenon of perceived validation of exclusion of minoritarian subjects as a consequence of their ‘danger’ to the nation. This threat was constructed in diverse ways, the cataloguing of all of which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that after the Brexit vote hate crimes went up overall 41%, and against Muslims 326% (Virdee & McGeever, 2017; Ahmed, 2017, ‘6’35). However, the aspect of ‘violence’ in general and ‘terrorism’ in particular in constructing this phenomenon is notable in analyzing the media environment prior to the referendum. Cushion & Lewis’ analysis of the media coverage of the campaign concluded that “broadcasters’ mission to inform was muted in the echo chamber of claim and counter claim...[which] *constrained expert analysis and journalistic scrutiny*” (2017, p. 221). Worse still, this highly polarized environment produced an attack that prefigured Osborne’s in Finsbury Park one year later. In the final week of referendum campaigning, Thomas Mair murdered

Labour MP and remain campaigner, Jo Cox (Justice Wilkie, 2016). The same ‘news’ organizations that bemoaned Mair’s and Osborne’s violence reported extensively on the ‘dangers’ of immigration as represented by Liz Gerard in her ‘Chart of Shame’ exhibited in the British Migration Museum.

Gerard’s ongoing project documents the number of front pages of daily British newspapers that present migrants, migration or diversity in a negative light



Figure 2 Chart of Shame - 2016, Liz Gerard, British Migration Museum, 2017

in the form of a bar chart. Her 2016 sequence featured 287 front pages. Further, following the referendum result, the media consensus of ‘spikes’ in hate-crimes towards minorities simultaneously presented this violence as aberrant and located in the body of the ‘hateful’ racist while ignoring the consequences of their mediatizing in erasing the long histories of state and structural violence towards minorities. The ‘spectacular’ violence and intimidation inflicted upon diverse communities in the United Kingdom, was and is a part of larger structures of oppression and social closure that preceded the toxicity of the referendum discourse (Burnett, 2017). As such, Riz’s disidentificatory practice presents a critique of viewing violence, racism and exclusion from political projects of belonging as solely political disputes playing out between the Leave vs. Remain camps of the referendum. *Englistan* addresses longer histories of contested belonging and exclusion in and to the ‘green and pleasant land’, and rejects the exculpatory narrative peddled that spectacular acts of violence are the actions of a ‘few bad apples’.

Origin of ‘a green and pleasant land’

First appearing in 1804 as a part of the prologue to *Milton* by William Blake¹¹, the integral text of the original bears considering in full in order to give a baseline to its evolving use and divergence polyvocally. Preceding the verse is a prose dedication that illuminates in part Blake’s position on the politics of his aesthetic, wherein Blake extols:

Rouse up, O Young Men of the New Age! Set your foreheads against the ignorant hirelings! For we have hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and the University, who would, if they could, for ever *depress mental, and prolong corporeal war*. *Painters!* On you I call. *Sculptors!* *Architects!* Suffer not the fashionable fools to depress your powers...believe Christ and his Apostles that *there is a*

¹¹ William Blake (1757 – 1827) was a Londoner, Romantic poet, engraver and painter.

become England, historical revisionists still look to justify its veracity. A prime example of this fashion is the 2009 documentary *And Did Those Feet, Did Jesus come to England?* where Christian-theologian Gordon Strachan argues for the truth of the myth, ciphered and passed down through druids, occultists, early Christians and Blake (Strachan, 2009). The lesser said the better about this kind of ‘scholarship’, but it suffices to point to continuing trends in appropriating history to serve exclusionary ends, ends like Strachan’s that read the imagined community back into history to justify its hegemony in the present, suppressing Blake’s revolutionary aspects in insisting on an exclusively literal, decontextualized reading of his poem.

In contrast to Strachan’s use, the final two stanzas point to the fidelity of Riz’s interpretation of Blake’s texts more than to Osborne’s, whose messages and methods find common ground in the use of the inherited cultural material of their unique historical conjunctures, to advance a utopian critique of their respective presents. There is no more evidence to support Blake’s belief in the myth of Jesus’ visit to England than that Riz shares Blake’s penchant for revolutionary, mystic, romanticism and fascination with the book of revelation (1908). The point of their ‘ab-use’ of these appropriated symbols is that they are meaningful to their respective audiences, and this meaning can be redeployed in service of an aesthetic vision of the present and future. This appropriation of established symbols also highlights the role of self-censorship in Blake’s time, where credible fears of state sanction existed. Inasmuch as Blake’s politics needed to be ciphered (Pastergadis, 2014, p. 56) his political opinions were among his most clear in his own time, as Judy Cox argued in *The Socialist Review*: “Jerusalem is open to many interpretations. William Blake was a complex character and his works can be difficult to read - but one thing Blake was not, was a nationalist of any kind. He was a revolutionary” (2012, p. 2). To justify Cox’s claim, one need only look to the *Sussex Advertiser* in January 1804:

William Blake, an engraver at Felpham, was tried on a charge exhibited against him by two soldiers, for having uttered seditious and treasonable expressions, such as ‘D—n the King, d—n all his subjects, d—n his soldiers, they are all slaves; when Bonaparte comes, it will be cut-throat for cut-throat, and the weakest must go the wall; I will help him; &c. &c (Ellis, 1978, p. 236).

Although Blake was acquitted of these charges (which Blake scholar Jason Whittaker argues were fabricated¹²), his anti-imperialist aesthetic vision and subsequent self-censorship in ciphering his more revolutionary ideas in allegory is echoed by Riz's own criticisms of the contemporary British state's violence. Riz's track 'Post-9/11 Blues', was briefly banned from radio play in the UK for its line: "Shave your beard if you're brown, and you best salute the crown/Or they'll do you like Brazilians and shoot your arse down" (Ahmed, 2006). This reference to 'Brazilians' refers to and criticizes the London Metropolitan Police Service's killing of Jean Charles da Silva e De Menezes¹³ on July 22nd, 2005 in Stockwell Underground station amidst the securitization following the London bombings of July 7th. Riz's lyrics that address themes of terrorism and securitization help to shed light on one interpretation of Osborne's actions and invocation of 'a green and pleasant land'. In "Sour Times" on Riz's first full-length album, *MICroscope*, he points the finger squarely at inequality and isolation, rather than identity as root causes of violent extremism, simultaneously seeking "to vouch for mine" and connecting acts of violence to the:

thousands of angry young men that are lost/Sidelined in the economy, a marginal cost/They think there's no point in putting ballots up in the box/They got no place in this system, and no faith in its cogs/They're easy targets, that be getting brainwashed by these knobs (Ahmed, 2011, track 14).

The 'brainwashing' that characterized Osborne's radicalization was exposure online to right-wing extremist groups the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First (Rawlinson, 2018), whose dog-whistle rhetoric and invocation of an *ethnos* under threat implicitly and explicitly calls its supporters to violent action. What then did Osborne mean in invoking the reference? Drawing on Blake's romantic criticism of the 'demonic pollution' of the 'Satanic Mills' of his own time, Osborne invocation was grounded in a selective reading of the text, mediated by intermediaries whose appropriation of Blake's themes aestheticize political projects of ethnic homogeneity, exclusion and violence. As we will see in following the genealogy of the referent, the historicism and nostalgic-hegemonic gaze that enabled Osborne's violent invocation

¹² To support this contention, Whittaker cites Blake's commentary on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "Let us teach Buonaparte & whomsoever else it may concern That it is not *Arts* that follow & attend upon *Empire* but *Empire* that attends upon & follows [wherever Art leads]" (Whittaker, 2016a, my emphasis)

¹³ This episode was also documented by Roger Waters of Pink Floyd in his "Ballad of Jean Charles De Menezes"

has, in Benjamin's (1968) words "not ceased to be victorious" (Thesis VI), despite Blake's insistence on *mental*, not corporeal struggle.

Jingoism, equal rights and social democracy

The next significant instance in the genealogy of the 'green and pleasant land' is notable for its appearance (again) in the climate of international conflict, this time during WWI, and transposed into choral music. Though attempts had been made earlier by Walford Davis in 1907 and 1908 to set Blake's poem to music (Whittaker, 2016b, 01'48), it was not until the outbreak of war that the necessary circumstances for its mass uptake would present itself. British poet laureate, Robert Bridges, having edited a jingoistic anthology of English and French poems that included the Blake's text in the midst of WWI and as a representative of the 'Fight for Right' movement¹⁴, approached composer Hubert Parry about setting Blake's poem to music in order to "brace the spirit of the nation [to] accept with cheerfulness all the sacrifices necessary" (Carroll, 2011, p. 235). The hymn was first performed as 'And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time' March 28th, 1916; and quickly became known by 'Jerusalem'. Upon hearing it later, King George V declared his preference for it over 'God Save the King' as a national anthem (*Ibid*, p. 236). Despite the positive reception, Parry's misgivings about the 'Fight for Right' political movement for whom he had composed the music led him to withdraw his support formally in May 1917 (Whittaker, 2016b, 01'28-04'25). More in keeping with his politics, Parry encouraged the suffragette movement's use of the hymn in 1917, writing to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' (NUWSS) then-president, Millicent Fawcett in response to her request that it might become their official hymn, "I wish indeed it might become the Women Voters' hymn, as you suggest. People seem to enjoy singing it. And having the vote ought to diffuse a good deal of joy too. So, they would combine happily" (Dibble, 1992, p. 485). Following their meeting, Parry assigned the copyright to NUWSS in 1918, with his executors transferring it on to the Womens' Institutes in 1928 (who had used it as their anthem from 1924 onwards), after NUWSS disbanded

¹⁴ The closing lines of the preface to Bridges' *The spirit of man* (1915) will perhaps suffice to support this claim, and give some understanding of the nature of the 'Fight for Right' movement:

"Britons have ever fought well for their country, and their country's Cause is the high Cause of Freedom and Honour. That fairest earthly fame, that fame of Freedom, is inseparable from the names of Albion, Britain, England: it has gone out to American and the Antipodes, hallowing the names of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; it has found a new home in Africa: and this heritage is our glory and happiness. We can therefore be happy in our sorrows, happy even in the death of our beloved who fall in the fight; for they die nobly, as heroes and saints die, with hearts and hands unstained by hatred or wrong." (iv-v)

(Dibble, 2016). Whittaker (2016b) described this period of ‘And did those feet/Jerusalem’s’ contested use as indicative of “underlying radical tensions. This was the double life of Jerusalem in its first few decades: both establishment and radical; a hymn whose usage depended very much on the status of those who sang it” (07’42).

And so, in the few short years after Blake’s little-known poem was set to music it was simultaneously mobilized in both ‘corporeal and mental fights’, the wholesale slaughter in Europe and the emancipation of British women over the age of thirty. This incongruity led one commentator’s retrospective of the diverse uses of the hymn to declare that it has been, “secular, Christian, pacific, patriotic, nationalistic” (Tambling, 2005, p. 2). By measure of its popularity, Parry’s arrangement was to appear in more than a dozen important hymnal collections between 1920-80 (Whittaker, 2016b, 03’20). Sung by suffragettes and veterans alike, the hymn’s double-life openly persisted until it was adopted by Clement Attlee’s Labour party, as its election year anthem in 1945, promising Britons to build a new Jerusalem in keeping with Blake’s utopian vision (Bew, 2017, p. 123). The legacy of this highly consequential government would be mixed: the establishment of the British National Health Service (NHS), partition and independence of India and Pakistan, the establishment of the State of Israel, the zenith of the British empire’s territorial extent, and the opening up of avenues for ‘migration’ to the UK from its imperial subjects-citizens with the passage of the 1948 *British Nationality Act*. This access to migration to the UK for its former colonial subjects was short lived, with the *Commonwealth Immigrants Acts*¹⁵ of 1962, ’68 and ’71 undertaking the process of stratification, forgetting and closure of their entitlement as citizens to access to social and political rights (Hammond Perry, 2016; Gledic, 2012, p. 60-61). All of these legislative milestones can be said to impinge upon the evolving notion of ‘a green and pleasant land’, firstly by the social democratic consensus that post-War enabled the building of the modern welfare state and secondly in the continuing violence the UK fomented abroad that enabled its national self-presentations to take the line of a ‘tired and unheeded civilizer,’ leaving the ‘lesser races’ to their follies (Lawrence, 1982, p. 70). Yet practically, the contradiction of the destruction brought by WWII, an increasingly ageing demographic, and a booming economy flush with Marshall Plan funds left the UK with a substantial labour shortage. This moment of transition and forgotten continuity that would in

¹⁵ The legal and formal precedent for these acts came in the form of the 1905 *Aliens Act*, targeting then migrants fleeing Tsarist Russia (Pellew, 1989)

British history come to be known as ‘Empire Windrush’ is an example of the “elision of colonialism and empire as constitutive aspects of modernity’s development” (Bhambra, 2016, p. 357). The Labour government’s attempt to appease migrants suffering racism, violence and exploitation came legislatively in the form of the 1965, ’68 and ‘76 *Race Relations Acts*, whose supposed spirit was outlined by Attlee’s then-Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins in a 1966 meeting with members of the National Association for Commonwealth Immigrants, defining integration

“not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (Jenkins, 1999). This position found its ideological opposite (and Osborne’s forebear) in then-opposition Conservative politician, Enoch



Figure 3 National Front March, Southhall, 1967, *Panjabis of Southhall Project*

Powell and the National Front Movement. In contrast to Jenkins’ position, which Powell dubbed ‘dangerously deluded’, Powell defined integration as “to become for all practical purposes indistinguishable from its other members” (Powell, 1968). As we shall see, it was Powell, and his ideological descendants who prefigured Osborne’s interpretation of the ‘green and pleasant land’ as under threat, and paradoxically, whose ‘pleasantness’ is in need of violent, spectacular assertion. A common tactic from this era all the way to Osborne’s attack on the Finsbury Park Mosque is the selection of diverse communities for acts of violence and intimidation, using these spectacles to symbolically impose meaning on place and its residents. The early days of the National Front were characterized by these tactics, in the form of marches in immigrant communities like London’s Southhall. The National Front movement was the ideological and practical forebear of the current crop of the United Kingdom Independence Party, the British National Party, Britain First and the English Defence League that now, as then, envisioned the ‘diseased nation’ afflicted by an enemy within rather than without (Solomos *et al.*, 1982, p. 23).

Racism, repression and deregulation

Powell burst onto the national scene in April 20th, 1968 with what has come to be known as the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech on the dangers of diversity and the urgent need for a retrograde movement to the imagined UK before Empire, yet with its advantages¹⁶(Hatherley, 2016, p. 112-3). Speaking to the Birmingham Conservative Party Association, Powell was invited as the Shadow (opposition) Cabinet Secretary for Defence. Given the contemporary debate about the second *Race Relations Act*¹⁷, his speech and references to ‘discrimination’ should be read in that context:

The *discrimination* and the *deprivation*, the sense of alarm and of resentment, lies not with the immigrant population but with those among whom they have come and are still coming... [have] *the sense of being a persecuted minority which is growing among ordinary English people...* [who have] found themselves made strangers in their own country... ..followed by children, charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies¹⁸. They cannot speak English...As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding (Powell, 1968, my emphasis)

In his speech, Powell presented England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ as at risk of being overrun by diversity and descending into sectarian racial conflicts¹⁹. This particular conjuncture is subject to revision in Chris Hannan’s Brexit-climate 2016 play, *What Shadows*; which favourably depicts Powell as a resolute and principled figure, melancholic for empire, who upon meeting a Sikh veteran skates over the violence of British rule in India with aestheticizing statements like “England without India is like Venice without the sea” (Hannan, 2016, p. 40). In an interview discussing his choice of subject, Hannan presented his identity as a descendent of Irish immigrants as justification:

I feel that I know how it feels to be part of a minority that suffers discrimination, and whose lives are dominated by identity issues for that reason; and also, I know the feeling of clinging fiercely to an identity that matters to you, and which you feel is under threat – and you can certainly sense that in Powell’s speech (Hannan, 2018)

Hannan’s appropriation of the discourses of anti-discrimination (legitimate or otherwise) echoes Powell’s erasure of the violence and experiences of discrimination in employment,

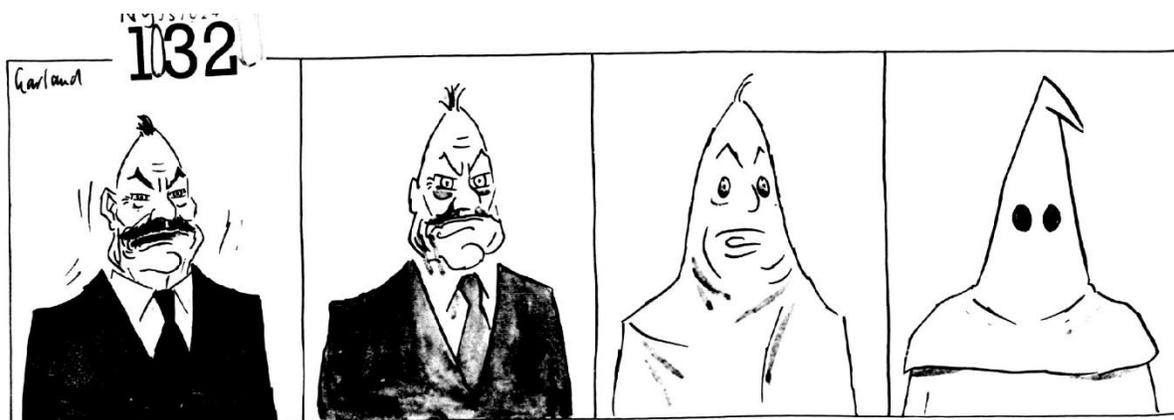
¹⁶ Paul Foot, writing on Powell’s rhetoric described this amnesia as the devolution of ‘Grand Imperialist to Little Englander’ (1969, p. 30)

¹⁷ Passed October 25th, 1968.

¹⁸ A contemporary slur for children of African descent.

¹⁹ That he aestheticized as “The River Tiber foaming with much blood” in explicit reference to Virgil’s *Aeneid* is ironic for two reasons: firstly, given the original prophecy was addressed to the incoming Trojans, not the established Latins; and secondly, that the intermingling of the two groups is the positive outcome of the story.

housing or access to services that the *Race Relations Acts* sought to redress (UK Parliament, 1968). This tactic of appropriation and erasure is also employed in the references to breaking taboos and free speech, wherein Powell presented his inflammatory remarks as “most necessary” and shared by “thousands and hundreds of thousands”, simultaneously presenting his remarks as speaking truth to power and as an authentic representative of the *ethnos* (Powell, 1968). Hannan’s play echoes this sentiment, with the Powell character explaining his need to speak “the feelings of the whole people of England...give them an identity” (Hannan, 2016, p. 49). *What Shadows* reinterprets Powell’s (1968) controversy as merit in an age of spectacle, excuses Powell of racism and instead locates it in the body of the sole black character, Rose Cruickshank, portraying one of the now-grown ‘piccaninnies’ of Powell’s original speech. By ignoring the structural consequences of Powell’s speech in legitimating the xenophobic and violent National Front movement and paradoxically locating racism *only* in the body of the oppressed, Hannan’s play solidifies ‘the overpowering of tradition’ by Powell that Benjamin so presciently warned of. It is from this moment on in 1968 that ‘a green and pleasant land’ would no longer be a pacific call to arms, but a ciphered reference to white racial purity and ethnic homogeneity. Powell’s location of ‘racial problems’ “as historical invariables...becomes a method of ideologically constructing the need for repatriation... [In Powell’s vision of the ‘green and pleasant land’,] traces of black life have been removed from the British past to ensure that blacks are not part of the British future” (Solomos *et al.*, 1982, p. 32). However, contemporary commentators were less gentle to Powell, as the below editorial cartoon of him can attest. Despite his immediate and



“Within the lapse of a generation or so we shall have succeeded to the benefit of nobody in reproducing in England’s green and pleasant land the haunting tragedy of the United States.” (Enoch Powell)

Figure 4 Editorial Cartoon, Garland N., 18 November 1968, *Daily Telegraph*

widespread criticism in the press, expulsion from his position in the shadow cabinet and national

mockery, Powell's interpretation of the 'green and pleasant land' as under threat from diversity did not disappear without a trace. Eight years later, Powell, then in the national spotlight campaigning against UK's entry into the European Economic Community, was given a full-throated endorsement by Eric Clapton while on stage at a concert in Birmingham,

I think we should vote for Enoch Powell. Enoch's our man. I think Enoch's right, I think we should send them all back. Stop Britain from becoming a black colony. *Get the foreigners out.* Get the wogs out. Get the coons out. *Keep Britain white...* This is England, this is a white country, we don't want any black wogs and coons living here (Clapton, 2018 [1976], my emphasis).

The use of the expression, 'Keep Britain White', then a prominent National Front slogan, was a ciphered signal to his audience connecting the aesthetics of ownership over the UK's 'green and pleasant land' to radical political action of enforcing an imagined ethnic homogeneity on the *demos* (Bell, 1980). As with Powell's speech, these comments provoked widespread condemnation, especially coming so soon after the high-profile murder of teenager Gurdip Singh Chaggar on June 3rd by a gang of right-wing extremists in Southhall²⁰. Prominent photographer and political activist Red Saunders, publicly responded to Clapton's on-stage comments in Birmingham, and reconciled Clapton's professed political views with his perceived appropriation and banalization of 'black' musical aesthetics: "Come on Eric...



Figure 5 Gurdip Singh Chaggar Protest March, Southhall, June 1976, Panjabis of Southhall Project

Own up. Half your music is black. You're rock music's biggest colonist...where would you be without the blues and R&B?" (Saunders *et al*, 1976). Published in mainstream music weeklies *NME*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*; Saunders' and his cosignatories condemnation also went out via *The Socialist Worker*, aspiring to more than a criticism of the hypocrisy of Clapton's comments, ended with a call to "organize a rank and file movement against the racist poison music" (*ibid*). This organized movement brought together prominent anti-racist musicians of all genres²¹, under

²⁰ The ensuing marches and political activism in the British South Asian community were notable as a watershed moment between generations, with the post-war elders favouring a conciliatory dialogic approach, while the youth increasingly favoured mass demonstrations (Smith, 2011).

²¹ Though practically slanted towards Punk, Reggae and New Wave.

the banner of ‘Rock Against Racism’ (RAR); to perform concerts and hold marches in areas where the National Front was active (Smith, 2011). In a 2017 retrospective documentary, *Life in 12 Bars*, Eric Clapton described the ’76 comments as “semi-racist²²”(Battsek) and born of addictions to alcohol and drugs; yet like Hannan’s *What Shadows*, *Life in 12 Bars* does not address the political climate or violence of the National Front Movement to which they give ideological sanction (*ibid*).

This xenophobia at the highest levels of the public sphere reflected and prefigured the political climate of ‘National Front’ movement, where migrants were instrumentalized as ready scapegoats for the emergent consequences of the process of dismantling Attlee’s promised post-war social safety-net (Solomos *et al.*, 1982, p. 15). Further, the tactics of spectacle and provocation of right-wing extremists at that time (Smith, 2011) were illustrated by the National Front choosing Southhall, colloquially known as *Chota Punjab* ‘Little Punjab’, for one of its meetings on April 23rd, 1979 in advance of the following month’s general election. The outcome of the meeting was a complete breakdown of trust between the local community and the police, hundreds of arrests of anti-National Front protesters, dozens of injuries and the death of one anti-fascist protester, Blair Peach (Smith, 2009). Characteristic of the Rock Against Racism platform’s engagement with the rights struggles of the day is Linton Kwesi Johnson’s ‘Reggae Fi Peach’, which asked the question “Oi people of England, great injustices are being committed upon this land, is England becoming a fascist state?” (1980, track 3) and the ‘Southhall Kids Are Innocent’ concerts the 13th and 14th of July in Finsbury Park, billed as fundraisers for the legal fees of the arrested protesters in Southhall.



Figure 6 Poster 'Southhall Kids are Innocent', RAR, May 1979, British Migration Museum

Yet, to reduce the thrust of these oppressions to race alone amidst the ‘stagflation’ and strikebreaking of 1970s UK is to forget Stuart Hall’s dictum that “Race is the modality in which class relations are experienced” (Hall *et al.*, 1968, p. 394). Thus, the violence and intimidation of

²² However, this exculpatory narrative skates over a 2004 interview with *Uncut Magazine* where he reiterated his support for Powell’s position, describing it as “brave”.

minorities were co-constitutive elements of this discourse of precarization, with ‘repatriation’ of migrants a common theme, realized in the form of “Paki-bashing”, violent strike-breaking and overpolicing of racialized communities (Solomos *et al.*, 1982, p. 25). Yet, as the Southhall South Asian community showed in its political activism from the 1956 formation of the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) down to the following generation’s 1976 establishment of the more militant Southhall Youth Movement (SYM), resistance to such exclusionary political projects of belonging in and to the ‘green and pleasant land’ was sustained. Autonomous political organization and community building by minority groups, like the IWA and SYM movements in Southhall towards a ‘green and pleasant land’ were repeatedly the target of National Front violence, which Member of Parliament for Southhall Sidney Bidwell described in 1981, “as an organized attempt to maraud” (Apple, 1981). Further, the experience of simultaneous over and under policing was evident in the widespread rioting of 1981 in Southhall, Brixton and other diverse communities throughout the UK. The state response to this violence in Brixton, in the form of the report of Lord Scarman’s inquiry “identified the causes of the riots in the pathology of the Caribbean family, in the question of bilingualism amongst Asian children” (Shukra, 1998, p. 54), and denied the existence of institutional racism in policing, as well as the provocation of these communities by right-wing extremists (Scarman, 1981). This ongoing suppression of autonomous projects of belonging and lukewarm condemnation of violence (state or paramilitary) continues in the next instance of the referent in this genealogy, within the climate of supposed policing reform post-Scarman report.

The concretization of this change in the meaning of ‘a green and pleasant land’ can be found in Dire Straits’ 1991 track ‘Iron Hand’. The song mythologizes the South Yorkshire Police’s violent repression of striking miners on



Figure 7 Riot police confront miners at Orgreave, *The Guardian*, 11 December 2016, Photofusion/Rex

June 18th, 1984 in what has since been marked as ‘The Battle of Orgreave’. The somber lyrics “Oh the iron will and the iron hand/In *England’s green and pleasant land*” (Knopfler, 1991, track 8, my emphasis) evoke a turn in the affective signification of the referent, already coded by

Powell as ‘under threat’ from a call to action to a lament for what is already lost. Though Dire Straits would by no means endorse a Powellite interpretation of the referent, Benjamin Teitelbaum, in his study of extreme right-wing identity through music in Scandinavia, *New Lions of the North* detailed how the projection of victimhood, loss, and bereavement are read as ciphered calls to violent action whether intended as such by the artists or not (2017). By repeated references to ‘iron’ as a cipher for Thatcherite union-busting, the utopian visionary verse was subsumed by the more pessimistic, insular and defensive interpretation, feeding into a discourse that Stuart Hall has described as originating in the early 1970s: “the class struggle was to be reconstructed, ideologically, in these terms: the conspiracy against the nations; holding the nation to ransom; the stark contrast between the subversive clique and the innocent worker and his family” (Hall *et al*, 1978, p. 238). This abject pessimism is given emphasis in ‘Iron Hand’s final lines, riffing again on Blake/Parry, “The same old fears and the same old crimes/We haven’t changed since *ancient times*” (Knopfler, 1991, track 8, my emphasis). This shift is crucial to the transformation of meaning of ‘And did those feet/Jerusalem’ from a call to build a concrete utopia as envisioned by Blake, Parry and the Suffragettes towards Osborne’s nation *cum ethnos* ‘under siege’, or already ‘conquered’.

Contemporary right-wing extremism and the mean and pleasant land

The heirs to the 1970s National Front movement, the British National Party, UKIP and Britain First have since invoked this spirit of ‘diversity-as-threat’ in appropriating and redefining the space of the political. By combining critiques of the neoliberal economic consensus and dog-whistle scapegoating of immigrants, these political movements have allowed “racism to be, paradoxically and perversely, ‘articulated as a minority position’, a refusal of orthodoxy. In this perverse logic, racism can then be embraced as a form of free speech” (Gržinić, 2014, p. 182-3). The consequences of this perceived conflation of racism and free speech are threefold. Firstly, in clothing itself in the language established to resist racist violence, discrimination and xenophobia, these movements instrumentalize ‘free speech’ and deprives it of its initially protective and emancipatory functions. Secondly, spectacular acts of violence like those of Thomas Mair or Darren Osborne, and the numerous other instances of violence prior to, during, and after the referendum are located in the aberrant and deviant body of ‘the racist’ (Burnett, 2017, p. 91), thereby denying claims to structural and systematic forces that maintain racializing

relations of dominance, precarity and exploitation (Ahmed, 2004). Thirdly, it coopts minority rights discourses built as correctives of majoritarian abuse of (sub)national identities within the United Kingdom that has long experienced little distinction between Britishness and Englishness (Billig, 2010). An illustration of the intersection of these outcomes is the



Figure 8 Campaign for English Parliament Van, 19 February 2017, Daily Express

‘English nationalist’ movement, separate from the more traditionally xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties mentioned above, but feeding into the same aestheticization of politics that seeks to make the *ethnos* synonymous with the *demos*. The Campaign for an English Parliament (CEP), ‘advocates’ by broadcasting ‘Jerusalem’ at high volume from a van decorated with the St. George’s Cross in immigrant-dense neighborhoods throughout England’s rustbelt where Powell found such appeal (Steyn, 2014, p. 108). When interviewed about the motivations behind the campaign, CEP campaigner Eddie Bone cited the “Anti-English racism [that] is rife across the UK” (Millar, 2017). Riz addressed role of the iconography of belonging that the CEP and other right-wing groups invoke within his aesthetic practice in an interview with *Vice* that clearly illustrates his disidentificatory approach to these symbols:

This isn’t about brown people coming over and taking over; it’s about trying to find a way of repurposing and refurbishing those symbols. It’s taking the St George’s Cross that I grew up seeing as *a symbol of hate and racism, and trying to repurpose it*. Englistan is just Hindi or Urdu for ‘England’ (Ahmed, 2016b, my emphasis).

In *Englistan*, Riz addresses this phenomenon directly in the spoken word outro to the album, “I Ain’t Bein Racist

But”, the music video for which features a repurposing of the traditional symbolism of the terror video claiming responsibility and preaching hate, but substituting a balaclava-clad apparently white



Figure 9 I ain't being racist but... music video (detail), *Englistan*, 2016

man, in front of a St. George's Cross. The refrain that makes up the title and first lines of the song is a familiar one to minoritarian subjects, true to what my grandmother used to say that, 'everything before the 'But' is bullshit'. The video's image is as simple and affective in its visual imagery as is the text of the masked terrorist's speech, which can be divided into two sequential parts within Riz's satire. The first part is an ironic mimicry of the exclusionary narrative common on the extreme right and the second, wherein the figure in the video begins to research 'British' genealogical origins, is a systematic refutation of the racist tropes ironically presented in the first part.

The song's first line begins soft-spoken, with the masked figure's intensity building as he recounts the litany of rote grievances characteristic of right-wing nativist movements worldwide. St George's Cross is given special attention as a symbol of and proxy for the *ethnos* in need of defence "I mean the flag is red and white, but I don't see no pink faces... I try to be a patriot, they're calling me a racist!... Plotting since 1948, until they tan the union jack like it's on holiday" (2016f, track 9). The second part of the song is the terrorist's increasingly uncomfortable realization that "every cultural identity is shot through by strands from numberless other places on the planet" (Jonsson, 2004, p. 64). With straight faced irony Riz presents the figure of the racist with such ethnographic discoveries as "wait, I'm lost, so now we're Paddy Spaghetti Jew Kraut Viking Frogs?" (2016f, track 9). However, the ironic nativist rhetoric quickly reasserts itself, culminating in the racist's understanding that:

There's one British tradition that will always remain pure and that's being prejudiced against the immigrant scum!
Whether it's Paki, frogs, vikings, or Ethiopians skulls, and when they end up a part of us and we all become one, we wait till the next lot try coming along
And when they do, my Somali Polish kids will be pissed at all these immigrants coming over and ruining shit. (2016f, track 9)

The static single shot is maintained throughout, visually signalling to the viewer that this represents one, narrow definition of belonging in and to the 'green and pleasant land'. As we shall see, the video for *Englistan*'s eponymous title-track, inverts this monocultural lens visually by its use of rapid fire juxtaposition and disidentifies with the historicism that is so effectively parodied in 'I Ain't Bein Racist But...'. This structure is true to Bhabha's (1984) claim that the "*menace* of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (p. 129). The song's final lines illustrate Riz's effective disidentification with the St George's Cross and destabilization of the xenophobic discourse it

underpinned: “The red cross on the flag means no entry - duh! Wait- what d'you mean Saint George was Turk?” (2016f, track 9).

Revisionism, culture and a green and pleasant land

The penultimate example in this genealogy of the use of ‘And Did Those Feet/Jerusalem’ is Danny Boyle’s 2012 London Summer Olympics opening ceremony. The use of the music is notable as the first sound heard in the ceremony, opening on a pastoral English idyll (at first) free from any strife or ‘satanic mills’. This use combined both a rehashing of the CEP employment of the hymn as ‘English’ and simultaneous signalling to those of the more nationalist stripe by framing the singing of ‘And Did Those Feet/Jerusalem’ alongside anthems of the other three constituent nations of the UK²³. The second performance of ‘And Did Those Feet/Jerusalem’ signals the scene change from the homage to the industrial revolution²⁴ to the end of empire and the founding of the National Health Service (NHS); making the connection between the hymn, migrant labour and rights struggles that culminated in the building of the postwar British welfare state under Attlee’s government.

Boyle’s ceremony fits nicely within a period of revisionism of history and of belonging in and to British nationhood; putting it in the uneasy company of works like *And did those feet, Did Jesus Visit England?*, *What Shadows* and *‘Life in Twelve Bars’*. The most profound irony being that at the time of Boyle’s 2012 ceremony, thirty-years of neoliberal consensus had succeeded in hollowing out significant elements of the British welfare state he so lauded (Hatherley, 2016, p. 44). Further, the current Conservative government had, despite the Olympic announcer’s claim to the ‘universal’ access to the NHS, deputized health service providers into the roles of border enforcement agents and fatally restricted access to care for undocumented persons (Doctors of the World UK, 2017; Maldonado *et al*, 2017).

Englistan, 2016

Parallel to the CEP and extreme right movements lampooned in ‘I Ain’t Bein Racist But...’ and the nostalgic gazes of the documentaries discussed above is Riz’s vision of ‘actually-existing-

²³ *Cwm Rhondda* (Bread of Heaven) for Wales, ‘Flower of Scotland’ for Scotland and ‘Danny Boy’ for Ulster.

²⁴ Itself deeply indebted to Turner’s *Dudley Castle* (1835), Humphrey Jennings’s *Pandaemonium* and the documentary films of the 1930s (Hatherley, 2016, p. 44)

multiculturalism' as it is lived in the UK. In seeking to contrast the "myth we export [of an] all-white world of Lords and Ladies" (Ahmed, 2016a, 162), Riz described the *Englistan* album and title track as an attempt to *stretch* the word 'England' so that he could live inside it comfortably (Ahmed, 2016c). The visual representation accords with his avoidance of 'rose-tinted' nostalgia (*ibid*) with the title track's video opening on a wall-papering of anti-immigrant and anti-diversity newspaper headlines reminiscent of Gerard's *Chart of Shame – 2016* (Fig. 2). Overlapping with this imagery is a newsanchor's narration of "whether it's the referendum, or whether it's the barrage of anti-immigrant media coverage in the run up to it...the result has compounded a feeling of isolation, a sense of disconnection, from *the country that they moved to*" (2016e, track one, my emphasis). The transposition of this broadcast with the procession of *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* covers is a subtle reinforcement of Riz's contention that it is imperative for minoritarian subjects to tell their own stories, "because if we don't, *its told for us* by people who don't understand" (2016d, my emphasis). The newsanchor's misrepresentation criticized in the opening lines is twofold: firstly, in representing diversity as those who have come here from elsewhere, it externalized minoritarian experience; and secondly, it assumed feelings of alienation are experienced only by the 'foreigner', rather than by large swathes of the *demos* who do not conform to a narrow, imagined vision of the *ethnos*. Riz returns to the theme of the media in the first verse, beginning the typical account of 'riots' at the act of provocation rather than their mediatization and mainstream interpretation, "*Pigs hit kids so/Bricks hit windows and the High Street burns...and the news is half/the truth wrapped up in boobs and arse*" (2016e, track 1). By foregrounding oppression as the cause of social unrest, Riz connects the mediatization of urban violence to systems of dominance. Not content to legitimize these hackneyed stigmatizations of immigrant and lower-class communities as sites of violence, Riz chose to set the video in precisely such communities that have been so debased in dominant discourse's representational economy (Muñoz, 1999, p. 165).

The representation of diversity within the 'Englistan' music video is a strong contrast the newsanchor's opening comments and with 'I Ain't Bein Racist But...'s static imagery. Featuring Riz walking in London's Brick Lane and Manchester's Moss Side neighborhoods, dressed in a hybrid jersey of the English and Pakistani colours (see in Fig. 1) the intersections of belonging across cultures and within the space of the nation are continually reinforced. The camera alternates from pastoral landscapes reminiscent of Blake's imagery, to close ups of WWII

veterans, Rastafari, Muslims at prayer, Hindi at tea, Sandys Row Synagogue in London, decaying council housing and Brick Lane Jamme Masjid. These rapid-fire visual juxtapositions echo the inclusive aesthetic of belonging evoked in the song's lyrics, across class and racial antagonisms, "On this little island/Where we're all surviving/Politeness mixed with violence...Racist beef, cakes and tea/All go together like a doh-rey-mee" (2016e, track 1). Ultimately this disidentification is critical to Riz's connotations of belonging, as a hybrid experience that needs to *stretch* exclusionary definitions to *be* at home at home. It is in this spirit that the final lines of the song should be read, not as a denunciation nor nostalgia for elsewhere, but as a realistic appraisal of the present and a hope for the future: "Try to make the best of what's bad/That's why we wave the flag...All for a green, pleasant land/All for a mean and pleasant land/All for a mean and pleasant land" (2016e, track 1).

The cipher of 'a green and pleasant land' highlights the conjuncture of violent repression and autonomous claims for access to social and political rights. Against nostalgic aestheticizations of an imagined gendered, ethnic or religious requirement for access; the overarching theme highlighted by Riz is the successive assertion of belonging in and to *the nation*. By documenting these projects of belonging aesthetically, 'Englistan' militates for an alternative utopian vision of inclusion in and to British society, and a more global understanding of the embeddedness of empire within the British experience (Bhambra & Riley, 2017), as always, eloquently illustrated by Riz:

When people ask me where I'm from...my response has always been "London". And that's not me trying to erase my heritage. That's trying to *get people to recognise who actually built London*. The Empire built London. *My ancestors built this city* before they ever set foot in this place. So, when I say London, that's what I mean. *My blood is in these bricks* from day. (2016b, my emphasis)

The expansive narratives of 'actually-existing-multiculturalism' presented by Riz do not traffic in claims to autochthony within an assimilatory binary of us : them in the pattern of the exclusionary violence of the National Front, CEP, or coopted media discourses that represent the *ethnos = demos*. Instead, Riz presents in Englistan's visual and acoustic registers alternative lived experiences of belonging *in* and *to* the nation; whose claims to rights are founded in struggle, genealogy, residency and the assertion of belonging *as is their due* (Ahmed, 2017). In his address to the UK Parliament, Riz (2017) argued for the need for "a new national story that embraces and empowers as many of us as possible, rather than excluding us and alienating large

sections of the population” (04’40). Aesthetics is uniquely capable of speaking across the boundaries set by politics, by appealing to what art theorist Thierry De Duve described as what we “have in common *beyond* and *across* cultural specificity” (2008, p.146). In Riz’ words, “Culture is a place where you can put yourself in somebody else’s shoes, and a one-size shoe shop doesn’t make any sense” (2017, 11’14).

Chapter Three: *mare nostrum*



Figure 10 Boat Polyptych, Safet Zec, *Exodus*, 2017



Figure 11 Lampedusa Cross, Francesco Tuccio, British Museum, 2017

In this chapter, the various aesthetic objects and performances engage with the concept of ownership over territory, bringing to the surface the contested sovereignties, histories and rights-claims to *mare nostrum* in Italian imaginaries of the nation, particularly in the contemporary region of Veneto. The two leading epigraphs, both contemporary artworks addressing violence in *mare nostrum*, engage variously with what art theorist Howard Caygill (2008) argued is the “ontology of art... [to] test the human possibility of living peaceably” (p. 161). This possibility is articulated by Derrida (2005) as the ‘principle of hospitality,’ formed of the unlimited and unconditional; and the conditioned and conditional. The task then, for Derrida, in *practicing* hospitality, is to “calculate the risks, yes, but without closing the door on the incalculable, that is, on the *future* and the foreigner” (Derrida, 2005, p. 6, my emphasis). Zec’s *Exodus* hopefully and

heroically frames the movement of migrants at sea as the test of this caring and peaceful coexistence with a mind to the future of these people and their destination in Italy. In stark contrast, Tuccio's *Lampedusa Cross(es)* are mass-produced commodifications of the extermination-by-negligence that is EU and Italian policy in the *mare nostrum* (Cuttitta, 2015), produced out of the material consequences of the continued submission of hospitality to risk-calculation and the 'good border spectacle' (De Genova, 2013). The difference between the two aesthetic practices articulates a tension between emphasis in specificity and universalism that Thierry De Duve (2008), in his debate with Caygill, considered central to the ontology of art, that is, to "address something that humans have in common beyond and across cultural specificity" (p. 146). Looking to the explicit Christian iconography of Tuccio's *Lampedusa Cross*, which could for Caygill only articulate the 'possibility of *dying* peaceably'; and for De Duve, could never speak across, nor beyond cultural specificity; it seems clear that the future-oriented imagery of hope and survival of Zec's *Exodus* better answers Derrida's call to *practice* hospitality (2005). However more loyal is Zec's attention to context, materials and the actors represented; this chapter will show, the aesthetic referent of *mare nostrum*, represented by Tuccio's practice as a violent 'Italianization' of the imagined maritime space of the nation is part of a greater genealogy of spectacular aestheticizations of violence. It is in this vein that Zec's aesthetic practice is also disidentificatory, both engaging with the genealogy elaborated below, but also repurposing it in service of a demand for the expansion of the political, and a testimony to the need to enact a transformative hospitality.

Veneto Autonomy Referendum

Given the *Exodus* exhibition's explicitly political content, its overlap with the 2017 Veneto autonomy referendum campaign can only be interpreted as an example of what Benjamin called in reference to the Italian context seventy-five years earlier 'the politicization of aesthetics' by Safet Zec. The various statements by advocates of the referendum from the governing *Liga Veneta* (Fogu, 2010, p. 16) and other right-wing political parties clearly articulated a populist consensus, playing on myths of the *Serenissima* (lit. most serene) of the Venetian Republic²⁵ (while obscuring any responsibility for its and Italy's imperial horrors visited on its neighbors), as well as proffering grand promises to extract greater financial

²⁵ As a benevolent maritime empire

autonomy and control of migrant settlement from Rome. In this way, the *Liga*'s campaign activated latent discourses of racism, internal secessionism and euroskepticism (Weiler, 2017, p. 13). However, Piris (2017) would caution that the referendum also had a strong class dynamic, "It is no accident that secessionist trends appear in the richest regions... Richer regions try to avoid solidarity with the poorer parts of the State to which they belong, to keep control of their revenues and not subsidise the poorer regions" (p. 78). With the longstanding regional political dominance of the *Liga*, the referendum was a foregone conclusion, with ultimately 98.1% ballots cast in favour (Regione Del Veneto, 2017). However, because the Italian constitution does not recognize unilateral regional referendums²⁶, it only bore advisory status in a legal sense. Nevertheless, the lack of legal force of the vote did not stem the violence that characterizes the movement of peoples through *mare nostrum* to a safer shore as represented in Safet Zec's *j'accuse, Polyptych Boat*, which within the *Exodus* cycle confronts the viewer with a near to-scale monument to the violence at the borders of 'Italian' territory.

Origin of *mare nostrum*

The term *mare nostrum* lit. 'our sea' dates from Roman times, and yet is still subject to dispute as to its precise meaning. The three principal interpretations are a teleological historicism, geographic signifier, or space of the political. According to Gambash (2016),

modern interpretations of it are often misguided...in drawing too direct lines between the occurrence of the term and an alleged Roman perception of political ownership over the Mediterranean. Such a reading of *mare nostrum* would typically go hand in hand with simplistic descriptions of Roman imperialism...More nuanced interpretations go as far as to suggest that *the title* – and, by implication, *the imperialistic agenda* which it must have represented – *were conceived teleologically*, with Roman thinkers and politicians *narrating past motivations in light of present achievements* (p. 27, my emphasis).

In support of this view, Gambash (2016) cites Beck (2011) to demonstrate a clear linguistic heritage in the self-same usage of the term in Greek that "does *not* reveal itself to be connotative of political power and empire" (p. 28, my emphasis). In disputing this interpretation, Nicols, citing Tacitus in *Agricola 21 & 30*, argues that the 'our' in *mare nostrum*

refers to areas within the Empire that enjoy peace, urbanization, culture, civilization; indeed, specifically *humanitas*. Implicitly these were places indeed where *hospites* and *hospitium*... and other conventions were

²⁶ Declared unconstitutional in judgement no. 118/2015 of the Italian Constitutional Court, in response to the *Liga*'s Law No. 16/2014 organizing a referendum on secession (Fasone, 2017, p. 49)

respected, and peaceful exchange could take place... in the Republic, one did not need to be associated with the Roman Empire to enjoy the benefits of Roman *hospitium*. In the Principate, however, participation in the system was based on and defined by a sense of territory. Those within the Roman frontiers, individuals and communities, were eligible to enjoy the benefits of *hospitium* and to participate in this form of *humanitas*; those outside the frontiers were excluded from both (2016, p. 185).

For the diverse uses of the term in this chapter, both Gambash's and Nicols' clarifications are illuminating of the standpoint from which to proceed with the genealogy. *Mare nostrum* can be then a neutral geographic signifier, transposed from a pre-existing linguistic norm (Greek); a space of *humanitas*, where conventions of *hospitium* are respected; as well as a teleologic revision, reading the empire-state's present back into history.

The theoretical spirit of Zec's critique in his 2017 *Exodus* exhibition is to be found in Nicol's definition of the relationship of *hospitium*: which he characterizes as, "the protection of person and of property of the alien when in the community of his *hospes* / guestfriend, and that it served to enhance the reputation of each party and was celebrated / commemorated in a variety of ways by both parties" (2016, p. 181). Critically however, Zec's *Exodus* goes far further than an academic comparison of changing theoretical reference points, his exhibition disidentifies with the politics of dehumanization present in the current conjuncture's embrace of the teleological reading of *mare nostrum*. By engaging with the themes of suffering at sea, Zec disidentifies with the concept of *mare nostrum* in the midst of its ciphered revival, as a 'presumptive ownership' over the sea that, as the survey of the later development of the referent will show, has become a teleological project of empire-building historicism and spectacle. This much is clear in the one paragraph Zec penned regarding his *Exodus* project, "I would like for my art to contribute to the growth of necessary moral uprising, that alone can tear apart this unbearable curtain of indifference" (2017, p. 26).

***Mare nostrum Irredenta*²⁷!**

"...I will magnify you on the Sea / I will glorify you on the Sea / I will offer you myrrh and blood of the altar / which I carry on the prow / To make of *all* the Oceans *Our Sea!* / Amen"
(D'Annunzio, 1995 [1904-7], my emphasis)

²⁷ Literally translated as 'Unredeemed', the common refrain *Italia Irredenta!* referred to the as-yet unincorporated territories with allegedly Italoophone minorities or majorities into the newly-united Kingdom of Italy from the *Risorgimento* of the 1860s until the end of WWII (Conversi, 2009, p. 102).

The modern usage of the term was largely popularized as a teleological project aesthetically by Italian author Gabriele D'Annunzio, and politically by Giuseppe Mazzini (Fogu, 1996, p. 329), who together were principal figures in the 'Irredentist' movement of the late 19th, and early 20th centuries. Irredentism's central premise was that borders of the Italian *demos* should conform to its allegedly-homogenous *ethnos*, thus claiming regions of Albania, Slovenia, the Dalmatian coastline, Trentino, Nice and Corsica as a part of their Italian empire-state building project.

The opening epigraph of this section, while taken from prologue entitled 'To the Adriatic', should not be read as an exclusive delimitation of the meaning of *mare nostrum* in the modern period. Insofar as the deixis of both 'our' and 'sea' are vague, the referent has lent and continues to lend itself to different, yet co-constitutive and intersecting imaginaries of the maritime space of the nation; be they labelled imperialist, colonialist or irredentist. As Patrizia Palumbo (2003) has shown, "Colonial discourse is an integral part of Italian culture. Indeed, this discourse goes back to the era *before* the expansionistic wars of the late nineteenth century in Africa and *the unification of the nation*" (p. 12, my emphasis). The global character of this interpretation is evident in the epigraph's final promise, 'To make of *all* the Oceans Our Sea!' This invocation, written between 1904-7, was; in the form of an ode to the *Serenissima* of Venetian maritime dominance; a call to continue the contemporary imperialist expansion of Italy's nascent overseas empire underway in Eritrea, Somalia, the Dodecanese islands and soon to be genocidally imposed on Libya. Despite this, D'Annunzio's contemporary commentator, Adriano Tilgher (1929), argued that his oeuvre should not be characterized as a 'romantic colonialism,' and instead read as a collection of 'violent and visceral tragedies'. Yet, many scholars have argued that it is precisely the tragic nostalgia of the 'empire-unredeemed' evoked in works such as *La Nave* and *Le Novelle della Pescara* that connect the alleged victimization of the imagined community to the production of imperial and colonial violence (Galbo, 1996; Bosworth, 2014). Further to such an interpretation connecting D'Annunzio's motifs of 'violence, viscera, and tragedy' to the Italian empire-building project underway from the 1880s was the work of his late contemporaries and inheritors, the Futurist movement.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti officially inaugurated the Futurist movement with the 1909 publication of their first manifesto in the Parisian newspaper, *Le Figaro*. Article nine of the manifesto was particularly telling of aspects of an initially cacophonous movement that

attempted to appeal to both right and left politically, with a strong anti-historical flavour; that would solidify in the following decades to the full embrace of its role as fascist apologists and propagandists (Ialongo, 2015, p. 54). Article nine of their inaugural manifesto announced: “We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman” (Marinetti, 1909). This inculcation of an ontology of violence, as both an aesthetic-principle and social project was anything but abstract. By examining both the texts and contexts of selected later manifestos, it becomes abundantly clear how much Marinetti’s movement extended and elaborated D’Annunzio’s ‘violent tragedies’ to the advocacy of all-out militarism. This link is complicated by the fact of D’Annunzio’s poetic elevation and elegies of the grandiosity of Venice with *La Nave*, and by extension the nostalgia for the *Serenissima* of Venetian dominance of the Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean (Bosworth, 2014, p. 72). For the Futurists, Italy’s cultural heritage was a weight to be thrown off (Bowler, 1991, p. 769), supplanting tourism with industry, in preparation for conflict with its neighbors and to facilitate colonial expansion. And so, Marinetti’s 1910 *Venezia passéista* manifesto, both implicitly criticized D’Annunzio’s poetic nostalgia for the lost-venetian empire of *La Nave* and yet arrived at the same irredentist conclusion, “*We want to prepare the birth of an industrial and militant Venice, that can dominate the Adriatic, the great Italian lake*” (Marinetti, 1910, my emphasis). Included in this manifesto were provocative elements designed to foster controversy and draw greater attention to the Futurists. In the same vein, according to Marinetti, 800,000 copies²⁸ of this manifesto were thrown from the Clocktower of the Venetian lido to inspire the masses to his proposals for Venetian reformation. Marinetti attempted to translate his publicity efforts in to political power in the 1913 general elections, issuing a political program that attempted to appeal to various spectrums of society, but maintained the aestheticization of violence outlined above. It is worth quoting at length:

A LARGER FLEET AND ARMY; A PEOPLE PROUD OF BEING ITALIAN,
IN FAVOUR OF WAR...CYNICAL FOREIGN POLICY,
CLEVERLY AGGRESSIVE – COLONIAL EXPANSIONISM – LIBERALISM.
IRREDENTISM. – PANITALIANISM. – PRIMACY OF ITALY...

²⁸ Marinetti, like D’Annunzio, was an able self-promoter; given the population of Venice in the 1911 census stood at approximately 160,700, his figure of 800,000 pamphlets seems unlikely.

VIOLENT MODERNIZATION OF PASSÉIST CITIES
(ROME, VENICE, FLORENCE, ETC.). [Oct 11, 1913] (Marinetti, 1913)

This tactic, of pamphleting not for the recipients, but for the attendant controversy and in service of promoting a rising militarism was shared by D'Annunzio and Marinetti in their work as 'Interventionists' (Conversi, 2009, p. 99). Both pushed for Italy to enter the First World War on the side of the Triple Entente, with the Futurists typically aiming for scandal by provocatively burning the Austro-Hungarian flag (Watkins, 2002, p. 203), while D'Annunzio used his international fame to advance the cause, famously telling the French ambassador to Russia in June 1914 that, "War, a great national war, is [Italy's] last chance of salvation" (Watkins, 200); as well as each publishing articles internationally (Ialongo, 2015, p. 51).

D'Annunzio wholeheartedly embraced Marinetti's pamphleting tactic upon Italy's entry into the First World War with his 1915 flight over Trieste and his 1918 flight over Vienna. The 1915 image was published as a full-page back cover of *Corriere della Sera* and reads "The poet threw patriotic messages to our brothers. [Trieste,] the end of your martyrdom is nigh!" The irony of the Italian air force in the midst of bombing of Trieste elevating its victims *cum* 'brothers' to the status of martyrs is profound, yet the unreflective tone of the message is evident of the wholesale uptake of the principle narrative of the Irredentist movement, which elided violent conquest and redemption. Thus, the 'martyrdom' to which the residents of Trieste were soon to be freed from was, in the Irredentist Italian narrative, not the Italian bombs raining down upon them, but their perceived 'occupation' by the Austro-Hungarian Empire as the then-easternmost limit of the '*mare nostrum*'. The 1918 image is the Italian version of an originally German-language propaganda leaflet, written by the Futurist Ugo Ojetti that D'Annunzio dropped over Vienna reading in part,

Viennese! Come to know the Italians. We fly over Vienna, we can drop bombs by the ton...Do you want to continue the war? Continue it then. It will be your suicide...People of Vienna, think of your homes, wake up!



Figure 12 Sunday edition of *Corriere*, 29 August 1915, back cover

While the flight over Vienna had no express military purpose, it is difficult to overstate its significance as an act of propaganda and in fostering the cult of personality around Gabriele D'Annunzio as a warrior-poet and central nationalist figure (Adamson, 1990).

The wedding of D'Annunzio's heroic and lyric aesthetic of *mare nostrum* to violent

political action culminated in what has been labelled the 'Fiume venture' (Yarrow, 1942). The Paris Peace Treaty apportioned the Adriatic coastline²⁹ of the Austro-Hungarian empire south of Istria to the emerging nation-states of Croatia and Yugoslavia. Pronouncing this a "mutilated victory" (Galbo, 1996, p. 36), D'Annunzio led a force of Italian militia and mutinying mariners to his cause of resisting the apportionment of the city of Fiume (today-Rijeka) on the eastern Adriatic in which his fictionalized heroic Italian mariners were frequent visitors (D'Annunzio, 2006 [1902], p. 1). That an unofficial force could invade and occupy a foreign city was evidence of the instability of the region at the time amidst the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the ascendant nationalisms of its successor states (it was only three years before Mussolini's march on Rome). For the purposes of a genealogy of the aesthetic referent of *mare nostrum* it is telling that its aesthetic form was then and is still able to marshal violent political action (Bowler, 1991; Conversi, 2009). In proclaiming the constitution of his Italian Regency of Carnaro, D'Annunzio fused cultural activity and conquest, notably in article 50 of the 1920 constitution, entitled 'Public Instruction':

For any race of noble origin, culture is the best of all weapons. For the *Adriatic race*, harassed for centuries by a ceaseless struggle with an unlettered usurper, *culture is more than a weapon*; like faith and justice, it is an unconquerable force...[culture is] the chief sign of their moral right of rule... The *culture of Rome* must be here in our midst and the culture of Italy (O'Sullivan, 1983, p. 205, my emphasis).

This invocation of an 'Adriatic race,' whose culture and 'Roman' heritage are both justification for and the unconquerable force by which it dominates its neighbors obfuscates the violence and militarism of this 'mission to civilize' (Fogu, 2010, p. 5). Though D'Annunzio's



Figure 13 Propaganda leaflet, 'Flight over Vienna', Ugo Ojetti, 9 August 1918, Burzaqhi archive

²⁹ Excepting Zara (today: Zadar, Croatia)

‘Italian Regency of Carnaro’ was dismantled by the Italian state three months after this proclamation, the aesthetic invocation of *mare nostrum* was incorporated into the nascent Italian fascist movement’s political project of imperial and colonial expansion, with the claims of the irredentists taken up opportunistically, *e.g.* seizing Dalmatia, yet ‘abandoning’ Nice (Gumbrecht, 1996; Conversi, 2009, p. 102). Furthermore, enduring strategies of authoritarian governmentality, elaborated in the regency’s sixteen-month rule, such as the choreographed balcony speech, ‘Roman’ salute, pronouncement of ‘*l’eia alalà*³⁰’ extrajudicial *camice nere* (lit. black-shirts) terror-squads and their practice of forcing their enemies to ingest castor oil in the (often lethal) violent public humiliations were all later incorporated into the fascist toolkit (Galbo, 1996, p. 37). As one biographer would put it, D’Annunzio’s writings, exploits and cult of personality evoked in Italy and Italians a “forgotten greatness, myths of conquest and dreams of power of a frustrated generation, unknowingly disposed to furnish the ‘bases of masses’ to the political programs of the nascent industrialism” (Alatri, 1980, p. 18). This moment is invoked nostalgically by contemporary Milan-based ‘identitarian’ (read: extreme-right wing) musicians Sköll, in their album, *D’Annunzio* (2018a, track 1), who describe their project as “against the de-Italianization and against the emasculation of Gabriele D’Annunzio. Where others omit, distort, distort [we laud] the genius, hero, Italian” (Sköll, 2018b). The ideological transfer from D’Annunzio to Mussolini was in part facilitated by Marinetti, who joined D’Annunzio in Fiume and hoped to spread the radical revolution to Italy, labelling the initial *arditi* (lit. daring; shock troops) who joined with D’Annunzio as *disertori in avanti*, or ‘vanguard-deserters’ who, in radically breaking with the past, prefigured the new revolutionary Italy to come (Conversi, 2009, p. 114, e23).



Figure 14 "D'Annunzio" music video (detail), Sköll, *D'Annunzio*, 2018

Fascist *mare nostrum*

The revolutionary Italy that would come to be under Mussolini with initiation of the fascist period in Italian history is often marked by the 1922 ‘March on Rome’, itself an adoption of the fascist method of counting and historiography – implying an inexorability and inevitability

³⁰ From the Greek: Ἀλαλά, lit. ‘war cry’

of their always-under-construction imperial project, e.g. Fascist year I(1922), II('23), III('24)...XX('42). However, there are notable continuities in the activities of state and non-state actors before, during and after the *ventennio* (lit. twenty) years of fascist rule in Italy. The tactics of D'Annunzio's paramilitary *camice nere* meshed well with the 'total' project of fascist governmentality, and such continuities were also observable with the preceding liberal regime with respect to its colonial policy preceding the 'March on Rome', particularly in the fascist continuation and intensification of genocidal 'pacification' campaigns in Libya (Walston, 1997; Boggio, 2003, p. 284; Del Boca, 2005). As such, appeals to and justifications of actions on the basis of '*spazio vitale*' (lit. living space = *lebensraum*) as a solution to the problems of overpopulation and unemployment were commonplace in the upper echelons of the Italian *liberal* and fascist establishments and there was little need, nor appetite for a radical rupture in ongoing imperial aspirations to the *mare nostrum* as the means to that end (Mussolini, 1922; Piccioli, 1926; Conversi, 2009, p. 103).

State propaganda throughout the fascist period referred to the eastern Adriatic coastline as Italy's *terza sponda* (third shore) and north African coastline from French occupied Tunisia to British occupied Egypt as the *quarta sponda*³¹ (fourth shore), the seizure of which was seen as integral to the realization of the fascist imperial project (McLaren, 2006, p. 18). Marinetti, continually producing *manifesti* in his role as member of the fascist *accademia* outlined in his 1935 *Estetica futurista della guerra* 'Futurist Aesthetic of War,' his longstanding 'rebellion against the branding of war as anti-aesthetic.' This later manifesto illustrated the complete submission of the Futurists to what Benjamin called the 'aestheticization of politics', with Marinetti claiming at the outset of the war against Ethiopia that:

War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. *War is beautiful because it creates* new architecture like that of big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the *smoke spirals from burning villages*, and many others. *War is beautiful because it serves the glory of the great fascist Italy* (Marinetti, 1935, my emphasis).

Sköll has also composed an ode to Marinetti and the futurists in their 2017 album, *Marmofuoco*, entitled *Italia (La tempesta futurista)* 'Italy (The futurist storm). This song (re)presents the aestheticization of violence that runs across Marinetti's *manifesti*, fusing it with

³¹ For a fuller elaboration, see Claudio Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago 1974)

the sexualization of violence common to renderings of D'Annunzio's aesthetic and Sköll's canon.

The spectacle of this night of artillery stars...
of the war that evokes the shape of our women/a futurist dynamo in the perennial momentum of
the insomnia/Of the battle's daring,
in the cannonade...in the course of time, the event, thousands of flags, sweat,
bayonets, maces, gas masks, cavalry, blinding, overcoming, eruption, erection, screeching, avant-
garde, whiteness, lips, petrol, blonde, naked in the mirror, delight, applause, hardness:
all this is Italy! Filippo Tommaso Marinetti! (Sköll, 2017, my emphasis).

The continuation of this trend of aestheticizing political projects of extermination within the genealogy of *mare nostrum* is illustrated by the 1936 film and winner of the 'Coppa Mussolini' at the Venice Arts Festival the same year, *lo squadrone bianco* (The white squadron). Augusto Genina's film, Boggio notes, "as the only one of the 1930s filmed on-location in Libya must be situated within the heyday of the Ethiopian campaign and the proclamation of the Italian empire in Ethiopia in 1936" (2014, p. 284). By presenting to the Italian public a vision of the nobility of fascist colonialism and homosocial sacrifice in the form of the old and new commanders, Sant'Elia and Mario's decisions to abandon home life and serve the nation, the film participated in a two-pronged act of propaganda and historicism. Firstly, it presented the state narrative of *italiani brava gente* (lit. well-meaning Italians, benevolent colonialists) in opposition to the fascist state's international condemnation³² for its invasion of Ethiopia, use of indiscriminate aerial bombardments and mustard gas (Del Boca, 2005; Fogu, 2006). Secondly, it presented the Italians as heroically 'on the defensive' of their 'natural' fourth shore rather than the reality of the effective conclusion of armed conflict in Libya five years prior due their use of genocidal aerial campaigns and exterminatory concentration camps against the Senussi rebels in Cyrenaica (Seton-Watson, 1980, p. 172; Walston, 1997, p. 181; McLaren, 2006, p. 5). As Boggio has argued, *lo squadrone bianco* is an example of how Fascist cinema deployed "discourses of nostalgia to both internally and externally impose historical norms on the (violent) activity of the present" (2014, p. 284). Thus, the veneration of such a film, recipient of the grand prize of the nation's largest and most prestigious film festival must be seen in context of the

³² That such condemnation came from states perpetrating similar violence elsewhere points to Italy's increasing isolation internationally, and the importance of aesthetic projects like Genina's film to the regime's image (Ben-Ghiat, 2015)

goals of the regime, which at the time was encouraging massive colonization of and tourism to the province of Libya to make a reality of the rhetoric of *mare nostrum*. Ruth Ben-Ghiat further clarified the “multiple propagandistic agendas and markets of empire films” (2015, p. 3-4): of boosting Italy’s international reputation, pacifying colonized subjects, historicizing the empire and encouraging colonial settlement; meant their coordination was decided at the highest political levels. Education played a key element in this process with Fascist text books from 1934 onwards referring to the Tyrennian, Ionian and eastern Mediterranean collectively as *mare*

nostrum (Piscopo, 2006, p. 119).



Figure 15 School booklet, *Partita Nazionale Fascisti*, 1934 (Reprinted in Piscopo, 2006, p. 113)

Contemporary *mare nostrum*: “waves disguised as tombstones³³”

Despite the fall of Fascism’s effective end of Italian Empire, as with most elements of the Italian *ventennio*, there was no national reckoning with its colonial past nor the consequences of its imperialism (Seton-Watson, 1980; Ballinger, 2007, p. 714). Such was the historical amnesia, that faced with the continued deaths of thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean to Italy, from the late 1980s onwards, successive Italian governments collaborated actively with the Libyan and Tunisian regimes in maritime patrols, providing development funds in order to suppress migrants, who most often originated in Italy’s former colonies (Cuttitta, 2014; Borelli & Stanford, 2014; Elliot, 2015, p. 14). This contemporary iteration of *mare nostrum* as the ‘European Wall’ is what Zec (2017) referred to as “an unbearable curtain of indifference” (p. 26).

In seeking to avoid its responsibility for its rapacious and exploitative conquests of its neighbors (Del Boca, 2005; Ballinger, 2007; Fogu, 2010, p. 5) and participation in an economy that privileges migrant labour only so long as it is clandestine and ‘exploitable’ (Coppola *et al*, 2007; De Genova, 2013, p. 1181), the Italian government’s creeping militarization of its

³³ (Warsame, 2016, track 11)

maritime borders (and beyond) (Cuttitta, 2014) has contributed to the realization of and exacerbated the suffering at sea so movingly depicted by Zec. In outsourcing its maritime border enforcement to Tunisian and Libyan authorities (Bialasiewicz, 2012), and conducting operations in their national waters (Cuttitta, 2014), Italian authorities have focused their energies on excluding migrants from the space of *humanitas* and the rights to *hospitum*, represented by international protection and refugee status, in favour of a circumscribed temporary humanitarian protection within *mare nostrum* (Tazzioli, 2016, p. 8). As such, the suffering of migrants bound for Italy is only ‘mournable’ when they have crossed that imaginary line that FRONTEX and the Italian, Libyan and Tunisian navies have established that marks their rescue as ‘spectacular’ enough to enter ‘the slow channels of asylum or the fast channels of deportation’ (De Genova, 2013; Tazzioli, 2016, p. 5, 9).

It was within this climate and following one of two large shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa in 2013 that the Italian navy could unabashedly initiate Operation *Mare Nostrum*, which, according to the Italian navy website, “had the twofold purpose of *safeguarding human life at sea*, and *bringing to justice human traffickers and migrant smugglers*” (Ministero della Difesa, 2018, emphasis in original). This dual emphasis on *rescue* and *enforcement* echoes the discussion by Jon Burnett and the Race Relations Institute of the ‘pathologizing of violence’ against migrants in locating this violence *only* in the ‘exceptional’ body of the deviant, ‘hateful’ subject. Musaró (2017), writing on the Italian context, notes how the twin focus of ‘care and control’ in humanitarian intervention substitutes the ‘threatening’ migrant, with the ‘compassionate’ Italian and effaces any connection between the state racism producing the spectacle of ‘trafficker and smugglers’ (p. 13; De Genova, 2013). When taking this approach to the twin discourses of *rescue* and *enforcement* outlined in the Italian Navy’s Operation Mare Nostrum mission statement, it is clear how in the projection of the border’s violence onto the smuggler (oft-labelled, ‘trafficker’), and their spectacular apprehension, the state participates in a double-movement of defining a carceral subject as ‘illegal³⁴’ and absolving itself of any responsibility for the *status quo* producing that ‘illegality’ (De Genova, 2013, p. 1187-90). In the Italian context, this double movement obscures the constructed nature of deaths in the *mare*

³⁴ Long extended to the ‘illegalized’ migrants who are presented paradoxically as both victims and criminals; this discourse has also been weaponized against NGOs and non-state actors who engage in unsanctioned rescues in the *mare nostrum*, see: Cuttitta, 2014 & Tazzioli 2016.

nostrum as a consequence of the closure of safer avenues into Europe (Tazzioli, 2015, p. 63). Simultaneously, the Italian Navy loosened its policies regarding the diffusion of images on its vessels, going so far as to begin publishing a daily diary of sanctioned images, contracting film crews to produce short video portraying Italian soldiers in the role of heroes and migrants as victims; with the occasional oblique reference to nefarious smugglers (Musaró, 2017).

This ongoing aestheticization of border violence was not reserved only for new arrivals, but also for those with long residency, translating the articulations of border governmentality into the public sphere, and thus decentralizing the violence of the border spectacle to any person, space, enterprise, or institution over which the government may exercise authority (De Genova, 2013, p. 1183). As Sandro Mezzadra notes, “In Italy, the bipartisan stereotype of *buonismo* (‘being too nice’) is a variant of this framework that commonly stigmatizes – with varying degrees of condescension or contempt – those who still have time to sympathize with migrant rebellions” (2014, p. 240). Further, this *buonismo*, is itself an indirect and ciphered extension of the twofold national amnesia that renders the Italian colonial project conducted by *italiani brava gente*, supplanting the historical claims of victims of state violence with an inversion of entitlement-seeking foreigners (Fogu, 2006; Del Boca, 2005). As the long and contested histories of these borders attest, the teleological construction of the *mare nostrum* as the ‘European wall’ has violence built into its very foundation (Cuttitta, 2014, p. 34).

This structural violence was evident in the ‘negative’ consequences of Operation Mare Nostrum’s efficacy at rescuing migrants, of which over its lifecycle of search and rescue patrols saved 150,000 persons (UNHCR, 2014). That this outcome was not desirable is evident from the British Government’s description of these rescues as a ‘pull factor’ (UK Foreign Office, 2014) and in that its eventual replacement, FRONTEX operation ‘Triton’, was announced as “neither a search and rescue body nor does it take up the functions of a Rescue Coordination Centre” (EU Commission, 2014). Support for this contention is also found in that Triton initially had only one third of the monthly operating budget of Operation Mare Nostrum and was restricted to operating within thirty nautical miles of the coastline (Tazzioli, 2016). However, Tazzioli (2016) notes that the humanitarian and securitarian measures are not conflicting rationales in that the two operations were both “predicated in terms of containing and selecting (certain forms of) mobility... [neither of which included] *the freedom to move and to safely find a space for*

living...in the narrative of rescue politics” (p. 13, emphasis in original). Addressing this absence of ‘freedom’ in rescue politics, the following aesthetic practices considered variously undertake commemorative projects, either creating a space for those who cross *mare nostrum* stories’ to ‘speak’ or making a spectacle of their deaths.

Memorials in *mare nostrum*

Deaths in the *mare nostrum* are memorialized by various artists, some who seek to teleologically impose a universal reading onto their materials, and others whose aesthetic practices emphasize contingency and *humanitas* forgotten. In recognition of the historical recency of the constructed violence in the Mediterranean, this section refers to migrant vessels as (c)raft, meaning, the unsafe raft that these illegalized persons have been constrained to take. The first two aesthetic practices considered in this section are notable for their divergent approaches to material specificity of the aesthetic object, in that they both use the migrant (c)raft abandoned on the island of Lampedusa as their raw materials.

Countless, 2017



Figure 16 Al Hajj Saad Eid, Maya Ramsay, *Countless*, 2017

Maya Ramsay’s *Countless* project, begun in 2017, commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the first recorded migrant shipwreck in European waters. Featuring thirty graphite rubbings of migrant graves, as well as of the names on migrant (c)raft before their summary destruction, Ramsay’s project is a testimonial to the enormity of the willfully unknown deaths of ‘countless’

people in *mare nostrum*. The (c)raft she documents have their owner’s (or former owner’s) names or religious phrases painted on their decks that serve as the basis for documentation in graphite. The (c)raft pictured in fig. 16 is notable amongst her rubbings for the quality of its calligraphy, where other examples in the *Countless* series feature only spray-painted messages in informal, modern Arabic script. This gesture of care and beautification is unlikely to have been invested in by a smuggling network, and more likely reflects its original owner’s differentiation

of his property. This contention is supported by the multiple meanings of the phrase written: *الحاج سعد عيد*, lit. ‘Saad Eid, who has made pilgrimage to Mecca’. This literal reading would seem to indicate a pious owner (or former owner), proud of his pilgrimage and invested in the beautification of the object of his livelihood. However, the epithet ‘*الحاج سعد عيد*’, is also an honorific and mark of respect directed towards an elder in the community, *regardless* of whether they have made the physical journey to Mecca; as well as a socio-tribal affiliation that an individual can choose for themselves³⁵. The graves of which her rubbings mark a facsimile are themselves not what one would expect as a memorial, indicated only by a number, gender and often, ‘African’. That such absence and depth of information is salvageable in a fragment is liable to provoke depression at all that is lost and unknowable, and this is precisely the questioning provoked by Ramsay’s *Countless* project: How can this be all that there is? Who were they, who left these macabre traces? What Ramsay’s aesthetic practice offers tangibly is physical testimony to the unknowable, anchored in what fragments of flotsam remain before their all too quick destruction and forgetting. In contrast to *Countless*’ fidelity to the reality of violence and forgetting that has characterized the decades of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean stands Francesco Tuccio’s *Lampedusa Cross*.

Lampedusa Cross, 2009

Tuccio’s and Ramsay’s aesthetic practices share the engagement with commemorating the deaths in the *mare nostrum*. Tuccio’s aesthetic practice consists of carving crosses from the (c)raft that are abandoned ashore in Lampedusa, and in so doing also engages with the concept of ‘forgetting’ but in a way that is



Figure 18 Francesco Tuccio, 1 March 2017, *Lampedusa Pelagie*

far less critical. Firstly, the countless crosses Tuccio has carved since 2009 make the unique, singular title of *Lampedusa Cross* somewhat of a misrepresentation of an atelier that is turning out a significant output. This point is not simply stylistic but touches directly the



Figure 17 *Lampedusa Cross*, Francesco Tuccio, British Museum, 2015

³⁵ I am indebted to Hammam Skaik for his assistance in translating and clarifying the nuances of this inscription

issue of erasure of specificity that is at the heart of Tuccio’s aestheticizations of the (c)raft found on or brought to Lampedusa. Coming from the common premise with Ramsay of their symbolic importance and ephemerality, Tuccio employs them as raw material, and in the process of transformation into one of his crosses, erases any specificity they might have had beyond being a part of a ‘migrant (c)raft’. Secondly, Tuccio’s ‘promotion’ of his crosses on his website and through his ‘guerilla marketing’ of presenting migrants passing through the island with one of his crosses that in his words “represent a new hope that is born of the dramatic experience of these landings” (Tuccio, 2018a) commodifies instead of commemorates. Following Pope Francis’ visit to Lampedusa July 9th, 2013 and his use of liturgical objects made from migrant (c)raft³⁶ by Tuccio, demand for *Lampedusa Cross(es)* soared. The high-profile shipwrecks of the 3rd and 11th of October 2013, and the international attention that Lampedusa and the launch of Italy’s Operation ‘Mare Nostrum’ received further contributed to this trend.

The degree to which Tuccio has commodified his transformations of migrant (c)raft is evident in the order page from his website, advertising under the subsection ‘Religious Articles,’ “Small cross,’ € 15; ‘Cross necklace (small),’ € 10; ‘Cross necklace (large),’ € 13; ‘Wooden crucifix (made of wood from migrant boats)’ € 40” (Tuccio, 2018a). Perhaps the best illustration of these divergent memorial approaches is to be found in the physical description of the British museum’s (2018b) ‘version’ of the *Lampedusa Cross*, “A fragment of an iron nail survives at the top in the right side of the cross piece. The back of the cross piece is signed *F. Tuccio, Lampedusa*”, the artist’s twofold intervention to erase specificity and mark his ‘ownership’ here feels particularly crass when compared with Ramsay’s small acts of preservation of the fragments of forgotten lives.



Figure 19 *Lampedusa Cross* (detail), Francesco Tuccio, British Museum, 2015

In addition to the *Countless* project, Ramsay has also written critically of Tuccio’s practice and the production of art that takes migrant death at sea as its subject. In her essay, she asks poignantly, “how do migrants see the crosses? Is it right that migrant deaths are forevermore represented in the British Museum by the symbol of Christianity?” (Ramsay, 2016). The

³⁶ For an extended discussion of the symbolism of this mass see: Catania (2015)

misrepresentation that Ramsay sees in Tuccio's practice extends to the institutions that support him, like the British Museum, whose description of their *Lampedusa Cross* misattributes the provenance of the material, the number of the dead, their national origins and religious faith (Ramsay, 2016). Lastly, Ramsay takes issue with the narrative of 'crisis' and 'discovery' in the presentation of the cross by the British Museum as "*one of the first* examples of the terrible tragedies that have befallen refugees/migrants..." (2018b, p. 225, my emphasis). As Ramsay's aesthetic practice in *Countless* illustrates, deaths at sea in the Mediterranean are constructed, but not recent. These errors for Ramsay are more than typological, they point to the ideological preference for Christian victims in the western 'spectacular-empathetic gaze', which reveals itself to be "a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other's position as one's own" (Butler, 1993, p. 80), and as such more interested in the spectacles of suffering and rescue than its causes. Further, the use of the present perfect tense to describe 'tragedies that have befallen refugees/migrants' locates the violence in the past generally, thereby absolving the audience examining the *Lampedusa Cross* in the British Museum any responsibility for their complicity in these continuing deaths, evident from UK's refusal to assist Italy in the funding and prolongation of the Mare Nostrum Operation of 2013-4 (UK Foreign Office, 2014).

Venezia: Biennale vs. Chiesa di Santa Maria della Pietà

The context of the *Exodus* exhibition was notable for three reasons, first in its overlap with the *Liga Veneta's* autonomy referendum detailed in the introduction to this chapter, second its wider relationship to the 67th Venice Biennale, and third its specific venue of *La Chiesa di Santa Maria della Pietà*. Rather than repeating the discussion of the referendum, this section will consider the latter two elements in detail. The exhibition's run overlapped with the 67th Venice Biennale, yet was not included within it. If he so chose, an artist of Zec's international renown would have little difficulty finding an outlet within its many exhibition spaces and under its moniker - What then is to be made of this separation and simultaneity? George Baker (2004), discussing the 'trauma-model' of biennales, considers that the commemorative aspects of these exhibitions are liable to cooption as "manifestations of official culture... as tools to cover over ruptures, to spread amnesia, to deny the magnitude of historical loss" (p. 449). This cooption can have its explicit form in the likes of Augusto Genina's *Coppa Mussolini* win in 1936 for *Il*

squadrone bianco (and the Biennales during colonialism more generally), or in its more implicit form as with the high-art, disengaged ‘*Viva Arte Viva!*’ theme of the 67th Biennale under the curatorship of Christine Macel. As a resident in Italy since the escalation of hostilities in Sarajevo in 1992, and Venice from 1998, Zec is well acquainted with the Biennale’s form, aspirations and realities. Famously an artist of few words about his pieces and none about his exhibition decisions, he may nonetheless have provided a key for understanding what seems on the surface to be a criticism by non-association. In a 1995 interview conducted with the *Galleria Spazzapan* in Gorizia, Zec, discussing the reception of his art, recounted,

For a long time, I had the problem of only being appreciated for the exteriority, for the superficial beauty of the depiction, without understanding of the intimate substance of my pictures...only some know also how to comprehend the structure, the drama of a representation. *I cannot accept* that my paintings will be considered only as *nostalgic visions of a beautiful, serene land*, because what arises from this is only the object, which is in reality the least important thing (p. 72, my emphasis).

Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Enzo Bianchi (2017) echoes this sentiment in describing Zec’s ‘grand silence and communion’ with the space of *Santa Maria della Pietà* in preparing the *Exodus* exhibition. This ‘communion’ was not only a relation of Zec to the materiality of the exhibition space and its effect on the audience, but an extended interaction with its symbolic lexicon as well. As the first contemporary artist to exhibit in the space, Zec’s presentation drew heavily on the motifs of the venue, namely in the dedication of the church, to the figure of *La Pietà* (Romanelli, 2017, p. 48). This figuration, traditionally of the Virgin Mary holding the deceased body of Jesus in a seated position, is a stable Renaissance archetype rendered most famously by Michelangelo, of which numerous variations have been painted, sculpted, represented in film, the theatre, etc. The mourning mother holding her child became a symbolic code for Zec’s approach to *Exodus*, one that is realist in its depiction of Christ-the-man, caring for those that are suffering and heroic in its depiction of those that practice these small gestures of comfort. In contrast, The 67th Biennale’s apolitical central theme of *Viva Arte Viva!*, at a time of well-documented political violence in *mare nostrum*, echoes strongly of Benjamin’s (1968) charge of

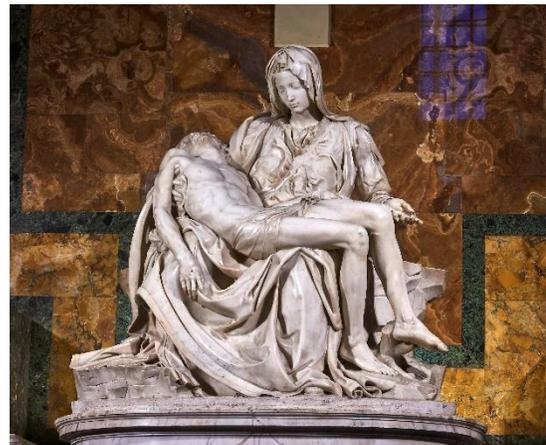


Figure 20 *La Pietà*, Michelangelo Buonarroti, St Peter’s Basilica, 1499

fiat ars perat mundus ‘let art be created art, though the world perish’ levelled against Marinetti and the Futurists. This ciphered revival stands in stark contrast to Zec’s relation to the space and



Figure 21 Exhibition carnet (detail), Study for Boat Polyptych, Safet Zec, Exodus, 2017

symbolism of the *Santa Maria della Pietà* in staging his *Exodus* exhibition, in tripartite dialogue explored below.

Shipwrecks in ‘mare nostrum’

Images of those suffering and rescued at sea articulate the spaces of dominion and *humanitas*; and the manner in which they are depicted can evoke survival, testimony and belonging; or death, spectacle and exclusion. As mentioned above, Safet Zec is famously taciturn, however, the catalogue for the *Exodus* exhibition featured two original essays that can be argued speak on behalf of the artist, or at the very least with his assent. The curator of the exhibition, Giandomenico Romanelli in his essay *Naufragi*, ‘Shipwrecks’, describes Zec’s approach to the canon with which he engages as: “Carefully entering on tiptoe, Zec dialogues daily with the masters who preceded him...” (Romanelli, 2017, p. 49). One of these masters that Enzo Bianchi cannot but refer to in his contribution, *Fare foreste delle ferite*, ‘To make forests out of wounds’ is the Venetian Renaissance painter Jacopo Tintoretto’s *San Marco salva un Saraceno durante un naufragio*, ‘Saint Mark saving a Saracen from a



Figure 22. *San Marco salva un Saraceno durante un naufragio*, Jacopo Tintoretto, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venezia. 1562-66

shipwreck'. This painting, representing the 'Other' as worthy of salvation and an act of rescue as 'saintly' offers a radical vision of the ethical responsibility to act with *humanitas* that is unencumbered by political, religious, or ethnic concerns. However, as De Genova (2013) would caution, the portrayal of the rescue of the 'Other', disembedded from the structural violence that produced *the need* for such rescue³⁷, is an example of the 'good border spectacle' that is part and parcel of the creation, meditation and aestheticization of violence (Baudrillard, 2008). It is with this careful dialogue where Zec shows his practice to be disidentificatory. While Tintoretto, Tuccio, or (as we shall see) De Caires Taylor might opt for the forcible inclusion of Christian, environmental or other political aesthetics, Zec choses time and again silence and reflection in constructing his compositions (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 44) with elements of the dominant discourse, but used for his own purposes "to expose and critique its conventions" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31) towards an aesthetic ontology of survival. The newspaper articles on which the paintings are staged are just visible enough to be symbolic without being legible; this connotation, rather than invocation (Muñoz, 1999, p. 165) is also clear in his universal motifs of suffering, comfort and hope; where others have opted for conditional (Christian) redemption, commodification or appropriation. Bianchi sees in Tintoretto's painting and in Zec's *Exodus* the aesthetic power of these images, which enable the viewer to grasp "without logical contortions, the elementary truth behind every personal, every political choice: these choices will interfere with the body of a man...either saving his life, or being an accomplice in his death" (Bianchi, 2017, p. 47). It is in this tripartite and disidentificatory approach that Zec's *Exodus* should be read and experienced, the cycle of paintings are presented in dialogue with the space and symbolism of *La Chiesa Santa Maria della Pietà*, with his artistic forebears, and most importantly with the violence and indifference in the space of *mare nostrum*.



Figure 23 Exhibition carnet (detail). Study for *Boat Polyptych*. Safet Zec, *Exodus*, 2017.

³⁷ In Tintoretto's case, Venetian colonialism.

One other such ‘dialogue with a master’ referred to both by Romanelli in his text, as well as Zec in his exhibition carnet is Géricault’s 1819 *Le Radeau de la Méduse*³⁸ ‘The Raft of the Medusa’ (originally titled: *Scène d’une naufrage* ‘Scene of a shipwreck’). The title is in reference to the real French frigate *Méduse*, which ran aground on a sandbar off the west African coast July 2nd, 1816. Her surviving crew cobbled together a raft to be dragged by their lifeboats in their hopes for rescue by the remainder of their convoy. Quickly abandoned by the more seaworthy lifeboats, the survivors on the raft turned to violence and cannibalism before being rescued after thirteen days drifting at sea. Originally numbering 150 aboard the raft, by the time of their rescue by their escort ship *Argus*, only 15 remained, of these, only 10 would survive.

Zec’s approach to building his canvases, drawing his figures and compositions from photos to as much reflect the *reality* of his subjects is reminiscent of the effort that Géricault put into researching the detail of his monumental representation of what was then a national scandal of the Bourbon monarchy. Not only did Géricault read the accounts of two of the survivors, Alexandre Corréard and Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny, he also interviewed them privately, and finally had them stand as models for two of the figures in the final work (Miles, 2015). He also

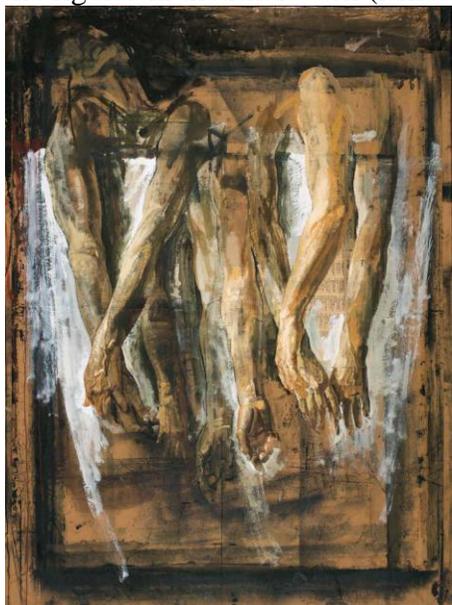


Figure 24 *Mani appese*, Safet Zec, *Exodus*, 2016

conducted extensive research on cadavers and bodyparts courtesy



Figure 25 *Étude de pieds et de mains*, Theodor Géricault, Louvre, 1818-9

of the Beaujon hospital, as well as having a replica of the raft built in his studio, complete with wax figures of his composition (*ibid*). The study of these limbs echoes strongly with Zec’s preparatory studies of hands in the *Exodus* exhibition, *Mani appese* ‘Hanging Arms’ which, while not practiced on cadavers, give the impression of limp, lifeless bodies, piled together without ceremony or reverence. Their impact on the final compositions in

³⁸ Géricault’s masterpiece has been the focus of engagement of numerous other contemporary artists, including Max Ernst, Vik Muniz, Sandra Cinto, Louise Fishman, Martin Kippenberger, Jeff Koons, Frank Stella, Peter Saul, among others.

Exodus, particularly in the variations on the figuration of *La Pietà*, is noticeable for the juxtaposition between fragility and care they allow Zec to evoke.

In addition to the thematic connection of suffering at sea, three aspects are notable in Géricault's compositional influence on Zec: the monumental scale, the collective hopeful gesture toward the horizon and the nesting of different vignettes within the greater composition. As to the scale, the *Raft of the Medusa* measures 4.91 by 7.16 meters, rendering the figures in the painting when viewed at a distance near to-scale. Further, as Miles notes, Géricault's original sketches had the raft floating slightly higher, with more water in the foreground (2015). That the composition was brought forward just to the bottom edge of the canvas, combined with the monumental scale, instills in the viewer the feeling that one could easily step into the painting and onto the raft. Lastly, whether this collective gesture in the top-right of the composition is meant to be hopeless or elevating is up to the viewer, as the miniscule dot on the horizon is undoubtedly too far away to see what Romanelli (2017) calls the "ghostly white of a handful of drifters at sea," (p. 49) and yet, the survivors of the *Méduse* were *eventually* rescued.



Figure 26 *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, Theodor Géricault, Louvre, 1819

To our eyes, the collective movement of the figures towards the horizon is the stuff of high Romanticism that Géricault is known for, however in its socio-historical context the painting equally stands as a realist³⁹ depiction of a nationally embarrassing episode, whose composition, figures' critical placement and orientation provide the means for the painter to articulate a systematic critique of the status quo. One of Géricault's vignettes within the painting's composition provides an excellent example of this critique. At the summit of the triangle of hopeful figures in the top right of the canvas, straining to catch the attention of the *Argus* on the horizon is one of the three black figures in the composition, none of whom number among the dead, who are instead concentrated towards the bottom and left sections of the canvas. This vitality is a subtle hint to Géricault's political views on his contemporary period's restoration of slavery after it was briefly banned in 1794-5 and reinstated under Napoleon in 1802 (Peabody, 2017). This 'black vitality' is opposed to the repeated allusions to cannibalism present in the painting, the treatment of which Géricault had originally considered making the principle subject of the painting rather than the ambiguous speck on the horizon (Miles). One need only look to the furtive gaze of the figure at the rear of the raft as his hands busy with the body below, the face of the figure beneath the barrel forming the 'triangle of hope', buried in his compatriot's flank; to see the marks of their degradation. Géricault ashened these figures, without making them indistinguishable from the black seamen heroically portrayed at the right of the composition, thereby inverting the colonial trope of projecting barbarity and practices of cannibalism onto black bodies.

Before turning to a discussion of Zec's uptake of these themes in *Exodus*, another contemporary artist's relation to Géricault's work bears consideration, for the manner in which it approaches differently the tripartite elements of the aesthetic heritage of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, enspatialization of its exhibition and its engagement with the referent of *mare nostrum*.

³⁹ Although labelled by some contemporaries as a "pile of corpses," the romanticism of the composition is evident in the classical forms and heroic poses of the figures, whose bulging muscles do not match so much with emaciated survivors and Géricault's use of *chiaroscuro*, both drawn from his visit in 1815 to Italy and exposure to Caravaggio's romantic style (Miles, 2015).

Jason De Caires Taylor's 2016 *Raft of Lampedusa* is a part of his *Museo Atlantico* project off the coast of Lanzarote in the Atlantic Ocean. The project consists of hundreds of concrete sculptures, submerged 14 meters underwater into a 'underwater art gallery' with admission prices of € 12 for qualified divers⁴⁰. The title of the work is a clear play on Géricault's, as is the skeletal figure laid towards the rear of the dinghy; however, it is at this point that the similarities in composition and figuration between the two works end. As noted



Figure 27 *Raft of Lampedusa*, Jason De Caires Taylor, Museo Atlantico, 2016

above, Géricault undertook meticulous preparatory work in order to make his *Radeau* as true to fact as possible, the substance of his critique playing out as much in the enspatialization and temporality of the work as within the confines of the canvas.

In contrast, De Caires Taylor's work involves a threefold displacement and erasure of critical context that Géricault (and as we shall see, Zec) carefully crafted in their monumental works. Firstly, by titling the piece after the island of Lampedusa (and the migrant arrivals there),

⁴⁰ Not counting equipment rentals, or instruction.

yet installing it off the coast of Lanzarote, De Caires Taylor presents the victims of Lampedusa as the focus, while erasing those who labour and journey to arrive at Lanzarote and its projection of ongoing colonialism as ‘Spanish’ territory off the coast of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara (Perez-Martin, 2014, p. 224-5). Secondly, in opposition to the modelling of figures based on ‘the real’ as



Figure 28 *Human gyre*, Jason De Caires Taylor, Museo Atlantico, 2016

in Géricault’s and Zec’s work, De Caires Taylor opts instead for anonymized and instrumentalized black bodies. His figures sport smiles, bikinis and shorts, none of which are permitted a unique history or provenance, nor even an accurate accounting of these fraught crossings: that they are cold, dangerous, and often fatal. With those travelling bearing all that the smugglers permit them to take with them; often scarred and traumatized as a result of their journeys (De Genova, 2013; Ramsay, 2016). Thirdly, in placing these anonymized bodies under water, where countless uncounted *real* bodies have disappeared throughout these crossings, and in creating a privileged site of tourism in a sea constantly patrolled by western naval vessels, De Caires Taylor, with his *Museo Atlantico*, reveals the degree to which his work is a commodification of suffering more than a denunciation of its authors. One other such work from the *Museo Atlantico*, entitled *Human gyre*, reinforces this third contention. The placement of this piece, featuring over two hundred figures as the ‘climax’ of the exhibition, fails to live up to Julia Steyn’s (2014) question of “whether subjectivity can be recovered out of the objectification of their living deaths, even if it is only in the future art of those pasts?” (p. 99). In portraying the undifferentiated mass of migrant bodies, thrown together by the ocean’s currents as the apex of the *Museo Atlantico* exhibition, De Caires Taylor instrumentalizes these anonymized bodies in spectacle to fashion an environmental and social critique. In so doing, he connects these unmourned migrant lives explicitly to waste, as in the oceanic ‘gyres’ that have accompanied the otherwise archaic term’s revival. As McLaren (2006) has observed in the Italo-Libyan colonial context, organized tourism, enabled by the conjunction of inequality and military control, can be defined as the ‘third wave of colonization’ (p. 3-7). On a final note, within the compositions of Géricault and Zec the grasps and caresses between figures are notable for their interactivity and

reification of the image-as-event, which was actually experienced in the real. In contrast, due to in part to his choice of material, De Caires Taylor's figures are almost exclusively separated from one another, without any gesture of comfort or desperation visible; instead leaving the impression of resignation and separation.

Exodus, 2017



Figure 29 Polyptych Boat (detail), Safet Zec, Exodus, 2017

In a pronounced contrast to De Caires Taylor's static, solitary, suffering; Zec's *Boat Polyptych*, within the greater poem that is *Exodus*, is saturated with images of struggle, care and hope. The 'axis of hope', running from the first to the fifth panel, is defined by the snaking presence of a fine red line, that passes disappearing and reappearing across the polyptych, to its zenith in the hands of two children looking toward the sun on the horizon,

strongly evocative of Géricault's imagery.

Support for this interpretation is found in an earlier work, *Mani per il pane* (2010) 'Hands for the bread', exhibited in the side chapel of *Santa Maria della Pietà*, where the red lines connect the rising hands to the object of their desperate hopes, the bread of life. As well, in Zec's characteristic style, the red lines also go to 'showing his work', leading from the hands to the journalistic images of bread distributions during the Yugoslav conflict that are the inspiration for, and physical basis of the composition. The practice of crafting his 'canvases' out of collaged images in newsprint that the composition addresses, notable in this earlier work, is repeated throughout the *Exodus* exhibition, a fact

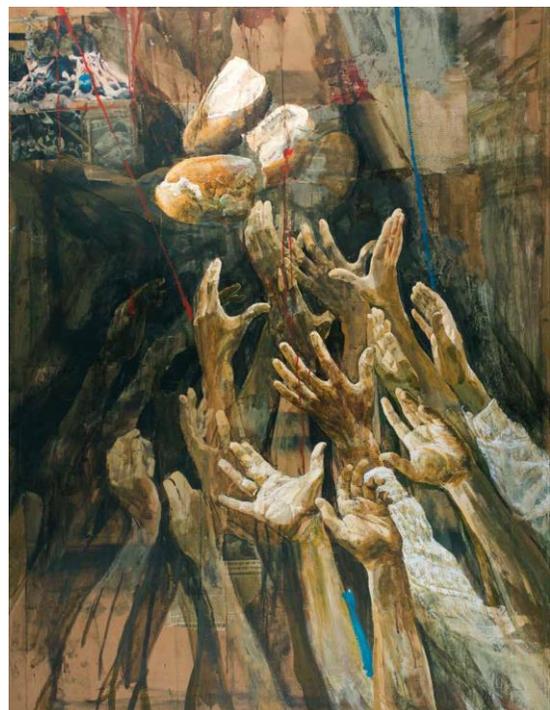


Figure 30 Mani per il pane, Safet Zec, I pane della Misericordia, 2010.

all the more impressive given the monumental scale in which Zec worked. All the ‘canvases’ are actually complex and unique collages of newsprint, reflecting the sources, inspirations, motifs, and contexts that Zec represents in his paintings. On this material basis we can begin to see how Zec’s practice differs so much from De Caires Taylor’s, as Enzo Bianchi (2017) argues, these “newspapers...remind us of all the images of suffering that flow under our fingers in the form of pages or screens” (p. 46). The originality and contextualization of Zec’s paintings in the material on which they are staged anchors them profoundly in ‘the social’ and in the subtle glimpses he allows us, to reject their consideration as merely objects of aesthetic appreciation, but instead as calls to “tear apart this unbearable curtain of indifference” (Zec, 2017, p. 26). That this indifference is maintained by spectacular mediatization is why Zec only *connotes* the journalism from which he builds his canvases, without *invoking* it so that it might speak and break the silence of understanding he shapes as testimony for his audience.

Of all the various inspirations of *Boat Polyptych*, both aesthetic and journalistic, one is made abundantly clear in both the exhibition carnet and the canvas itself. Out of the multitude of figures depicted, only one figure’s gaze interrogates the viewer directly. Just off centre of the middle panel is the only visible black figure, a woman, wearing the red line of hope as a necklace and staring directly at the viewer.



Figure 31 Polyptych Boat (detail), Safet Zec, Exodus, 2017

Her gaze is not desperate, pleading, anguished nor enraged; if anything, the object of pity of that thousand-mile stare is *us*, for approaching the (c)raft and its passengers with anything less than the humane *hospitum* they deserve. Within the carnet, the inspiration for this figure is found in an undated photograph of migrant arrivals to Italy, awaiting identification on the dockside of a southern port. In the original, as in the painting, the woman is noticeable for her direct, knowing gaze, standing upright amidst those hunkered down-heads buried in hands or arms, or clinging to poles for support. Within the *Exodus* catalogue, opposite this image is Zec’s rendering of Alan Kurdi, with the only accompanying text in the exhibition written by the artist. In a short paragraph, he clarified his goal for the exhibition, encapsulated in the gaze of this interrogating figure at sea in *mare nostrum*, as “to contribute to the necessary moral uprising” (2017, p. 26).

Echoing Géricault's composition, the dead and dying are placed towards the rear of the (c)raft, yet far from the unmourned and abandoned tangle in the earlier work. Of the three emaciated figures lying prone, one has been shrouded and all are flanked by mourners with their heads buried in sorrow. In further testament to their passage 'beyond hope', the section of the first and second panels where the bodies lie is the only part of the composition where the red line of hope disappears. Playing with the asymmetry of his 'collage-canvases', the transitions between the first and second panels, as well as the third and fourth, feature disembodied hands at the top of the composition, which provide a complement to the passage of the red line along the 'axis of hope'. Positioned where the visible refugees blend into the masses of the other passengers, these hands, oriented palms upward in a gesture of pleading contrast with the hands in the final panel, oriented palms downward or outward, and increasingly embodied until coming to those of the children holding the end of the red line, shielding their eyes to look to the horizon or indicate that which those further back can not yet see.

In dialogue with the space of *Santa Maria della Pietà*, the *Exodus* cycle overflowed with variations on the figure of *La Pietà*, with *Boat Polyptych* alone featuring eleven separate examples of parents cradling children in gestures of comfort and humanity. Given its monumental scale of 3.4 meters by 11 meters, the painting could only be exhibited along the length of the nave in the *Santa Maria della Pietà*, and forms one of the centrepieces of the exhibition.

The theme of '*Pietàs*' was further expounded throughout the nave, with the wall opposite leading into the chapel adorned with four images of parents bearing children. These four canvases, *Corpi Portati* (Carried Bodies), *Abbraccio* (Embrace), *Uomo e Bimba* (Man with Child), and *Uomo e Bimbi* (Man with Children) are also on a monumental scale of 3.2 meters by 2.2 meters, rendering the figures depicted as larger-than-life. Together they represent Zec's disidentificatory variation on the traditionally static grief of *La Pietà* in that they can each be characterized by motion, surging



Figure 32 *Uomo e bimbi*, Safet Zec, *Exodus*, 2017

upwards or forwards through suffering. By overlaying multiple traced, faded, and full renderings of the father's legs in *Uomo e Bimbi*, or the children's bodies in *Corpi Portati*, Zec presents the figures as aspirational and heroic, rather than despondent and mournful. The motion in *Uomo e Bimbi* is considered by Bianchi (2017) as revealing of Zec's "pictorial attitude", where the expression of pain is secondary within "two overlapping photograms," to "the ability of the man to rise and resume the journey of his exodus" (p. 47). This technique of 'overlapping photograms' is also employed in *Boat Polyptych*, where in the final two panels figures hanging out of sight off the edge of the (c)raft strive to pull themselves aboard, millimeters from the axis of hope, the tension in their skeletal backs emphasizing their will to survive rather than their immobilization in suffering.

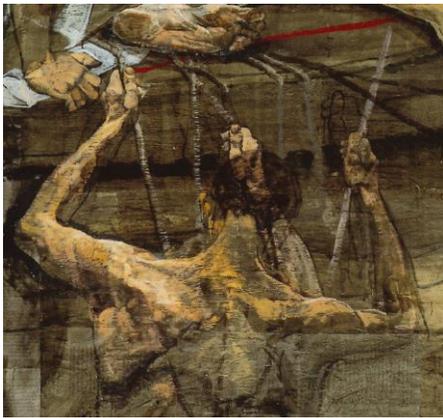


Figure 33 Polyptych Boat (detail), Safet Zec, Exodus, 2017

It is on that note that I will end the discussion of Zec's unique aesthetic of the *Exodus in mare nostrum*. The poem that is the cycle of paintings, their staging and composition articulated above all agency, urgency, the will to survive and a hope for a better future. As Enzo Bianchi (2017) wrote *Fare foreste delle ferite* for the exhibition catalogue, Zec shows us that "our response to this challenge cannot be that of a foot crushing a hand hanging on the edge of a barge" (p. 22). Thus, *Exodus* stands against spectacular, commodifying and static depictions of suffering, and instead calls to us to practice hospitality and recognize *humanitas* in *mare nostrum*.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illustrate, through the disidentificatory aesthetic practices of Riz MC and Safet Zec, the potential for a “utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 200). In his address to the UK Parliament, Riz (2017) described the possibility of the nation as *uniquely* imaginative, insofar as “our community coheres *only* within the bounds of our imagination, as far as our imagination will *stretch* I believe we need to...push our imagination to be as broad as our community actually *is*” (11’25, my emphasis). As such, *Englistan* and *Exodus* are nothing less than enactments of power by the disempowered in the face of repressive truth regimes, who, by recourse to nostalgia and spectacular aestheticizations of projects of exclusion attempt to erase the traces of their violent impositions of homogeneity.

In pointing to the “biases inherent in national memory,” via the ciphers of ‘a green and pleasant land’ and *mare nostrum* Riz and Zec, through their disidentificatory aesthetic practices, criticize the “homogenizing properties of national memory regimes” (Bond *et al*, 2017, p. 4-5). As an alternative, their aesthetic practices “point to a world in which exile and ethnicity are not stigmatized aberrations, but instead everyday aspects of national culture” (Muñoz, 1999, 176). Memory and disidentificatory memorial practice then, is more than an identity politics of the oppressed classes, but is instead a corrective of the *ethnos = demos* equalization that erases the embedded histories of nation and empire (Bhambra & Riley, 2017).

The degree to which both principal artists’ aesthetic practices explicitly criticize the spectacles of violence depicted and erased in journalistic media points to the cooption of these sites as loci of emancipatory struggles for recognition. While journalistic approaches are not irredeemable, without a radical and genuine democratization of their means of production, valorization and support as vessels of education rather than entertainment, they will continue to reproduce the gestures of power (Jonsson, 2004, p. 67). The persistence of these violences over time and in spite of political promise(s) gives sanction to the need to politicize aesthetics to reimagine current struggles for material and symbolic survival. The alternative of disidentificatory aesthetics, which does not only speak to the oppressed, articulates visions of belonging that are more than ‘hybrid’ and ‘niche’ (Ahmed, 2016b); thereby answering De Duve

and Caygill's call to 'speak *across* cultural specificity and test the possibility of living peaceably' (2008, my emphasis). The power of aesthetic projects like *Englistan* and *Exodus* is that they are both enduring and latent, and their "temporal range of reception is unlimited" (Demos, 2013, p. 248). While spectacle may be distracting, it is ultimately self-defeating in its endless need for and production of novelty.

In contrast, these performances and their material traces stand as testaments to the real and calls to our closer approximation in aesthetics and politics to its makeup (Ahmed, 2017, 02'11). In competing for the audience of a world-in-the-making, disidentificatory practice challenges the profusion of images whose demands for our attention distract us from the emancipatory struggles of the here and now. The reflective pause engendered by these disidentificatory performances gives space for memorials that connect the struggles of the past to those of the present, thereby restoring to the 'oppressed class its greatest strength, the image of its enslaved ancestors' (Benjamin, 1968, Thesis XII). Though perhaps not embraced today, their aesthetic practices are not relegated to the dustbins of history, just as they drew on the symbolic wells of their respective referents of 'a green and pleasant land' and *mare nostrum*, their work is one more building block in a future project of belonging, saturated with "the historical potential...[of] possible pasts that point to alternate futures" (Steyn & Stamselberg, 2014, p. 20).

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