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The black holes of Lesbos: Life and death at Moria camp. Border violence, asylum, and racisms at the edge of postcolonial Europe

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Abstract

The EU-Turkey Deal of 2016 led to the enactment of a restrictive and specific asylum process for the Greek island of Lesbos, making the former Moria camp a detention center for thousands of migrants who failed to access international protection. Based on ethnographic evidence, I analyze and propose that the asylum process in Lesbos—a postcolonial border space under EU interference and control—derives from the colonial system of white supremacy. Based on historical and re-actualized racializations of migrant populations from different countries of the global south, the aim of the Greek asylum process has been to subject migrant populations in Moria to various processes of control, detention, illegalization and ultimately exposure to premature socio-physical death as in black holes: historical spaces of anti-black racism and humanitarian abandonment in the most hidden layers of Moria.

Keywords: EU–Turkey deal, black hole, asylum, racisms, deportability, anti-black policing

1 Introduction

The multiple fires that broke out and destroyed the former Moria camp—on the Greek island of Lesbos—the night of 8 September 2020 left 13,000 people in a situation of utter destitution for several weeks. This tragedy was the culmination of the exhaustion and fury of the migrants from Moria after five years of inhumane conditions, deaths, fires, riots, and demonstrations against the Greek government supported by the EU border regime. After the historic ‘long summer of migration’ (Heller et al., 2018) in 2015 when 876,232¹ people transited through Greece and managed to overcome the multiple barriers within Europe, Lesbos has been rapidly reconfigured as one of the main epicenters of a renewed violent phase of mobility control and militarization through the implementation of the ‘hotspot approach.’

¹ Hellenic Police, Statistics: Arrests of Irregular Migrants in Greek Turkish land and sea borders (2015) <http://bit.ly/2kKe1Va> Accessed: 21-02-2021

Introduced by the European Agenda on Migration² as an emergency response, organizations such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the EU law enforcement agency (Europol) were deployed at the EU-external borders in order to assist, monitor and interfere with frontline states like Greece to ‘swiftly, register and fingerprint incoming migrants’ (European Commission, 2015, p. 6). A historical step toward the Europeanization of the border regulations in the Aegean Islands, this hotspot approach has contributed to the proliferation of buffer spaces like Lesbos, the reconfiguration of Moria as a violent EU hotspot on October 2015 and the subsequent entry into force of the EU-Turkey Deal of March 2016, which allowed the detention, illegalization and deportation of migrants on the basis of nationality and race—far from any possibility of international protection in Europe.

This article is based on a three-month research period between September and December 2016 in Lesbos where I conducted *ethnography-volunteering* in a small humanitarian organization in the family and vulnerables’ refugee camp ‘Kara Tepe’, five kilometers away from the former Moria camp. However, my interest in finding out the reasons why migrant populations of certain nationalities and races were surviving in Moria under conditions of prolonged detention, without humanitarian aid and without gaining access to the asylum process in Lesbos led me to leave ‘Kara Tepe’ to come into contact with them in the streets, public squares, and ports of Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, and later in the depths of the Moria camp.

The ethnographic conversations and testimonies that I collected with dozens of migrants³ mainly from North Africa and countries such as Cameroon, Congo, and to a lesser extent Pakistan, allowed me not only to know their grievances and their processes of seeking international protection in Moria but also to locate the causes for the state and European disciplinary violence on their bodies and subjectivities. Thus, the friendship bonds, the accompaniment in some of their demonstrations against Greek-European border policies and racism in Lesbos and my visit to Moria materialized this research where my voice was the common thread of people who not always know each other but who shared the experience of having been condemned to survive in Moria for trying to apply for international protection in a turbulent scenario of racism, riots, and deaths. Therefore, I situate this research in the genealogy of engaged anthropology whose interest arose not only out of academic concern, but also to critically analyze, question, and condemn the violent policies and practices taking place at the borders of Europe. Moreover, my interviews with agents of FRONTEX, EASO, the Hellenic Coast Guard and organizations such as The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)—after months of insistence, waiting, unanswered messages and constant rescheduling—allowed me to see how and why—from the perspective of Europe’s guardians—migrant populations are subjected to different spaces and temporalities under colonial logics by means of salvationist, humanitarian and security discourses.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I tried to turn my back to Moria for analytical, ethical-epistemic, and logistical reasons. My research in Lesbos had initially focused on ‘Kara Tepe’ so I decided not to try to enter Moria unless it was truly necessary for my analytical objectives. As a border spectacle (De Genova, 2002), I hesitated to enter to avoid

² A European Agenda Migration, European Commission (2015) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0240> Accessed: 21-02-2021.

³ The names shown in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the migrants themselves. Their real names do not appear here to protect their identities.

reproducing a sort of morbidity, sensationalism for violence and misery of this infamous camp, turned into a famous field site for researchers, journalists, politicians and celebrities mostly from the global north where excessive, violent and paralyzing dystopian narratives with ‘common sense conclusions regarding mismanagement and technical insufficiencies’ have been produced, making us, researchers, many times ‘complicit in the epistemological reproduction of the border’ (Rozakou, 2019, pp. 79–80).

In this highly restricted space for civilians, my chances of entry were nil in the face of the silence, indifference and arrogance of the Greek-European powers that placed a young non-white scholar originally from Mexico, a country of the global south, as a suspect with only a tourist visa, not speaking Greek and culturally distant from Greek society. Probably classified as politically leftist and pro-migrant being a social science researcher, my brown skin color, my nationality, my lack of a European visa, the little time I had and above all the lack of any high profile academic and political contact—usually a key of entry for select groups of investors (ibid.)—were factors that prevented my access to this field despite my privileged situation as a student with a scholarship and a passport. But after the multiple tragedies that took place during my field stay, after learning that the totality of migrants’ experiences in Lesbos originated in Moria, and after noticing how certain groups of migrants lived in confinement and did not leave this camp for fear of being further racialized and criminalized, I decided that the camp of Moria could not be omitted from my analysis. Therefore, I decided to enter with one of my interlocutors through a hole in the fence, allowing me to carry out a *quick transgressive ethnography* where ironically my non-whiteness, which influenced my impossibility to access Moria, allowed me to be inside without being stopped as an intruder, making me confirm my intuitions about the importance of race and racism as key aspects in this space. Thus, this ethnography, in the wake of the EU-Turkey deal, was one of the first inside Moria in that period, while I tried to avoid reproducing the urgent border spectacle by locating this complex hierarchical space in a historical context of long-standing violence, moving away from the presentism that characterizes the discourses on migrations in the Mediterranean.

Three sections make up this article. In the first part, I describe and analyze some of the first violent consequences of the 2016 EU–Turkey deal on the bodies and subjectivities of ‘economic migrants’ evidencing their criminalization and detention starting from the conversion of the Moria camp into an EU detention center, the introduction of new and regulatory mechanisms, as well as the entrenchment of European agencies such as FRONTEX, which deepened Greece’s role as post-colony of the central economies of the EU and as a key insular border space in the Mediterranean. In the second section, I analyze, in-depth, the fast-track border procedure, a violent mechanism introduced specifically in the Aegean islands in 2016 to legalize, immobilize and situate in the deportability zone (De Genova, 2002) as many applicants as possible under nationality and racial lines. Through prolonged detention processes, an absence of legal guidance, exclusionary and legally illegalizing laws, I suggest that the Greek Asylum Office and EASO, in collaboration with security agencies FRONTEX, predispose the voluntary renunciation to the right of asylum among North African Arab migrants living in Moria.

Subsequently, I propose the existence of certain spaces of Lesbos as black holes, where the most racialized and dehumanized populations of Lesbos are exposed to simultaneous practices of social policing and humanitarian abandonment by the EU border regime, ex-

posing them to a premature social and physical death. I argue that the black populations of Lesbos arrive in Lesbos already previously illegalized and dehumanized by means of a culture of anti-Black policing (Saucier & Woods, 2014) established since slavery and codified in disguise through the asylum process. The above leads me to evidence of the existence of a complex racialized architecture of hierarchization of different types of human beings within racial relations of power in Moria and more broadly in Lesbos.

2 The EU–Turkey statement, border violence, and the question of Europe in times of migrant immobility

The date was November 25th, 2016, and for the third time in three months, Moria camp was in flames once again. A 66-year-old Iraqi woman and her six-year-old grandson died, charred by the fire which consumed the tent that they lived in, and two other people, who were in the next tent, teetered between life and death for two weeks following the fire. The reason? They were using a small gas stove, simply trying to keep warm. With winter beginning, temperatures dipped to zero degrees Celsius at night, and the freezing wind was so strong that it felt like a continuous slap in the face.

As various Iraqi and Afghani groups confronted security forces—asserting their discontent with the precarious living conditions in Moria—rumors about the tragic fire began to circulate around Lesbos. People spoke of a new uprising that came as a protest to the extreme sluggishness of the asylum application process in Lesbos. Even if the events of that night had been purely gossip, other riots had broken out in this former camp. But this time, it wasn't the local newspapers who had alerted me to the news of this tragedy, but rather a text message from the old Nokia owned by Jack, a young Algerian living in Moria then: 'Some people are dying from burns. The situation is out of control [...] I finally got home; I found a way to get back.' Jack returned to Algeria without having succeeded in exercising his right to seek asylum in Greece—he preferred returning to the place he had escaped from to living with the uncertainty of an interminable and exhausting wait.

A few weeks earlier, I met Jack one night during one of the demonstrations against the EU migration and border policies in Lesbos. Young, tall, very thin and with small scars scattered across his cheeks—the result of shaving without a mirror. He was wearing an old jacket from a well-known basketball team that day. But the basketball games he had played in Oran, Algeria, after long days behind the wheel of his old taxi were a thing of the past; now his time was dedicated to fishing. Every day, Jack would gather with dozens of other Algerian migrants at the waterfront under the shade of two FRONTEX military boats which were anchored at the Mytilene port, waiting for something to bite. 'Wait and wait. That's what we do. There's nothing to do here,' is what I heard from many of these migrants. One can wait a long time to catch a fish, but one has to wait for a miracle in order to gain the right to leave the island, so highly monitored and militarized by FRONTEX and the Hellenic Coast Guard, which have guarded the maritime borders exhaustively since the implementation of the EU-Turkey Deal.

Jack's situation as well as that of thousands of migrants in Lesbos illustrates very well some of the violent consequences of the entry into force of the EU-Turkey statement on March 20, 2016. The aim of the deal was to legally allow the illegalization and deportation of migrants and to put an end to irregular migration from Turkey so that any migrant irregu-

larly arriving in Greece after March 20 and whose application for international protection was rejected would be deported to Turkey. A 1:1 scheme was also established whereby for every Syrian deported to Turkey; another Syrian would be resettled in Europe giving priority to those who had not been previously irregularized.⁴

As part of the effects of the deal, the Greek government decided to impose a geographical restriction on all migrants in Lesbos, prohibiting them from leaving the island during the examination of their applications for international protection. In this way, the Moria hotspot was reconfigured as a detention center for thousands of people like Jack who arrived after March 20, 2016. The situation meant an overpopulation and the collapse of the asylum procedures where around 5,000 people, in a space built for 2500 (Hänsel, 2020), were surviving in inhuman conditions in late 2016. These spatially imposed measures in the Aegean islands were evidence of the reconfiguration of Lesbos—once a space of fluid migratory transit—as an island prison whose asylum seekers were considered as detained until they proved to be deserving of international assistance.

After entering Moria from Turkey in summer 2016, Jack was immediately arrested and held in detention in the so-called pre-removal center: a highly secured detention area within Moria with a capacity to detain up to 420 people.⁵ As an Algerian, Jack was subjected to the ‘Pilot Project’⁶ of the Greek Police: a detention procedure, launched after the summer of 2016 and exclusively targeting single men coming from certain ‘low profile’ countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, although these practices were later extended to various groups of migrants under arbitrary and racist criteria. While the ultimate purpose was the deportation of these ‘undesirable aliens and economic migrants’ as described by the police circular of the Greek Ministry of Interior, the vast majority of people had usually been released and left to themselves in the Moria camp after three months of isolation, uncertainty and violence (Saranti, 2019).

From his container in the port of Mytilene, a member of the Hellenic Coast Guard who decided to remain anonymous, said: ‘If you look around, you can see that the refugees are free and can come here to Mytilene to take a walk and have a coffee. Our laws are not as unfair as they seem, rather we are dealing with an exceptional situation.’

From his office, he pointed to a group of refugees who were arriving in the city after having walked almost two hours from Moria, a route that runs along the shoulder of a road and involves numerous inclines. Jack and many others all laughed when I told them about the stance taken by the officials and these legal measures, which indeed are contrary to the humanitarian and international legal framework.

‘What is the use of leaving one prison, to enter another that is this island in the middle of the sea? What is the use of getting out of a prison if we can’t even get a coffee—if people look at us with distrust, if the police stop us at night?’ asked Jack ironically, while he attested that many migrants and families like his have spent up to three months in conditions of detention.

⁴ European Council, 2016, EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> Accessed: 23-02-2021.

⁵ Deportation Monitoring Aegean, 2018, The prison within the prison within the prison: the detention complex of Moria camp, <https://dm-aegean.bordermonitoring.eu/2018/09/23/the-prison-within-the-prison-within-the-prison-the-detention-complex-of-moria-camp/> Accessed: 18-02-2021

⁶ This project was extended since 2017 for sub-Saharan and West African people of asylum recognition, i.e. less than 25 per cent.

As thousands of migrants arrived after March 20th, Jack was not only received by Europe with an arrest by the Hellenic Coast Guard on the beach, but he was immediately subjected to the dreaded debriefing interview by FRONTEX agents in Moria, the purpose of which is not explained to migrants throughout multiple conversations with them. In 2016, the debriefing process was part of the first stage that every person who sets foot in Europe is subjected to. According to several testimonies in 2016, long and tense interrogations carried out by agents—some without uniforms and some even with dogs—were not unusual in these interviews, as the case of Dana, a young 25-year-old Kurdish-Iraqi migrant who arrived in Lesbos in April 2016: ‘The day I landed I was interrogated for about five hours in a room and treated as if I were a terrorist. They kept me locked up in a room; there was a very big dog next to the agent, he was aggressive [...] They asked me a lot of things: they wanted names of the people who had brought me here, how much I had paid, but nothing about my personal situation as a refugee.’ When I asked him if he recognized the officer’s uniform, he said that the person was dressed as a civilian.

Evidently, the debriefing interview consists of interrogation with the purpose of collecting intelligence information about human trafficking and terrorist networks, which is then shared with the European security agency Europol. A press officer for FRONTEX, whose identity has been hidden for security purposes, put aside all euphemisms and told me that, according to her, the debriefing interview serves to find potential terrorists attempting to enter Europe. Meanwhile, in its press report the agency boasts that its mandate has been reinforced in order to respond more forcefully to the current ‘humanitarian crisis’ at European borders.

However, for John B., the Dutch head of FRONTEX operations in Moria at that time, this process was quite different from what is described by dozens of migrants that I met in Lesbos. From inside the very discrete container of the agency in the Mytilene port—whose address is not public and access to is denied to civilians—John insisted and emphasized that every person who arrived in Lesbos had received immediate humanitarian assistance and information about their legal rights and how to apply for asylum.

This explanation contradicts the vast majority of my conversations with and testimonies from individuals regarding their arrival process in Lesbos. Additionally, it demonstrates the way Moria’s security frame is a symptom of European policies, which view migration itself as a security, sociocultural and racial threat that has to be managed, repelled and dissuaded on its external borders. In effect, these current punitive and disciplinary policies based on distrust and hostility toward migrants lead to the deepening of xenophobia and racism through confinement practices in Moria and along the Mediterranean.

Thus, the normalization and reinforcement of practices of spatial restrictions exercised by the Greek state and FRONTEX to the detriment of the rights of migrants have characterized the current period of response to the growing migratory flows in the Mediterranean. Jack says he was never informed why he was detained, nor did he have legal representation, nor was it explained to him how to apply for international protection, for as Saranti (2019) states, the Pilot Project not only lacks legal basis in Greece, but transgresses Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that stipulates that no one may be subjected to arbitrary imprisonment without being informed of his detention.

With enormous difficulty, Jack was only able to complete his registration and identification process and manage to survive in the violent pre-removal center of Moria. Once

released, Jack did not feel totally at liberty as he found himself in an even larger prison: The actual island called Lesbos, whose insularity naturally provides limits that are extremely difficult to overcome, including a long sea journey to the mainland. In the imagination of migrants from the Global South in Lesbos, Europe meant above all protection and security from the violent situations they escaped from, justice for the impunity and persecution that many experienced, and a place to rebuild their lives. But asylum seekers have encountered in Moria precisely what they fled, and which in itself is the embodiment of the contemporary EU border regime: continued violence—for being poor, for not being white, and for their national origins. For Jack and many others, there is neither humanity nor opportunities for them in Lesbos, their European mirage. They had no rights and no chance of mobility.

In 2016, it was common to hear from migrants and various foreign agents that Greece was not European enough for them; it is seen as a failed state in the face of immigration management—weak, irresponsible, and devastated by an endless imposed debt crisis, infected by institutional corruption and subjugated to the policies of European central economies. For his part, the local coast guard confessed that the violent migratory practices applied in Lesbos would not be legal and would even be less applied in most European countries. However, he justified this border violence as necessary for the protection of the continent in the face of an unprecedented flow of people from all over the world. From his point of view, the greater involvement, interference and protagonism of European agencies such as FRONTEX in Moria was necessary as it provided them with financial resources and training in intelligence and security.

Historically located on the margins of European imperialism but not colonized, Herzfeld (2002, p. 900) has argued that the modern Greek state has maintained a crypto-colonial relationship with the former European imperial powers. Thus, it embodied the need for ‘political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence (whose) relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models’. In the current period of border securitization, the deployment of European border powers is no longer only disguised through Greek institutions, but direct, on-site and hyper-visible by supranational agencies such as FRONTEX, EASO and Europol, whose foreign flags and languages characterize new border infrastructures (boats, cars, ships) as well as the historical key spaces of Greek national security and sovereignty. For different sectors of the local population with whom I spoke, this violent spectacle of European power on Lesbos has been traumatic, aggressive and humiliating but, in some cases, a necessary evil in the face of the growing military might of neighboring Turkey and the necessary disciplinary violence involved in the confinement of migrants in spaces like Moria.

To conclude, I suggest that in late 2016 Lesbos—and more broadly Greece—operated more as a post-colony of the central economies of the European Union than as a politically sovereign state in this community. In other words, my argument here demonstrated that Lesbos, as a key insular border space, and more widely Greece, as a peripheral economy, played an essential role for the Northern European countries as the main executor of the EU-Turkey statement, by modifying the administrative processes of camps like Moria, passing measures exclusively to the Greek islands and making their asylum system the

cornerstone of the illegalization of thousands of migrants in Moria, as will be discussed in the next section.

3 Asylum, migrant detention and power of deportability in Lesbos

Jack, along with hundreds of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Algerian, and Cameroonian migrants have still been fishing, protesting and surviving in Moria camp because they belong to nationalities with an asylum recognition rate below 25 per cent of the EU average calculated by the Statistical Office of the EU (EUROSTAT) database, so their cases are considered as expendable and are not even taken into account for months—even years— by the Greek Asylum Office and EASO. As part of the effects of the EU-Turkey deal, Greece had to enact a new asylum law 4375/2016, which served as a repository of key elements of European regulations (Hänsel & Kasperek, 2020). Under coercion and assistance, I argue that the Europeanization of the new asylum law became one of the most effective colonial mechanisms of the EU border regime in recent years in Greece and the Mediterranean in that it created an exclusionary procedure in terms of nationality and race under international law. As a consequence, the Greek asylum process was fragmented into two parts: one for the mainland and another exclusively for the Aegean islands called a ‘fast-track border procedure,’ spatially reconfiguring Lesbos as a novel border laboratory with the aim of illegalizing and indefinitely immobilizing migrant populations under the horizon of deportation, instrumentalizing the distant insularity of Lesbos with respect to the core of the EU as space suitable ‘for the creative exclusion of migratory rights,’ as in different islands around the world (Hess & Kasperek, 2017, p. 6).

I, therefore, assert that the restrictive and violent fast-track border procedure was based above all on the channeling of asylum seekers into different but similarly exclusive procedural routes based on asylum recognition rates measured by nationalities and statistically calculated by EUROSTAT. At the end of 2016, migrants with high acceptance rates (above 25 per cent) or potential refugees such as Syrians were subjected to the controversial admissibility interview: a filter prior to asylum examinations aimed at preventing people with a high probability of protection according to the Geneva Refugee Convention from applying for asylum in Greece on the grounds that Turkey is considered a safe third country for asylum seekers, as established by the EU-Turkey deal.

With six-billion-euro support as part of this deal, Turkey became indispensable to the EU. However, as Hänsel (2020) has pointed out, the deportation of Syrians on admissibility goals was not achieved in part because of Turkey’s denial to be just a passive recipient of the EU border regime and because Turkey’s classification as a safe third country has been legally contested in Lesbos. In fact, during 2016, appeals against inadmissibility decisions were overwhelmingly successful before the State (Konstantinou et al., 2016). Consequently, the appeal commissions were promptly replaced by the Greek government under pressure from the European Union, leading to a drastic increase in refusals. In this way, in September 2017, the Greek Supreme Administrative Court ruled to deport two Syrians after they had appealed their inadmissibility decisions twice. Under the argument of considering Turkey as a safe third country, they were never able to apply for asylum in Greece.⁷ This decision

⁷ Refworld, UNHCR, 2017, Joint decisions 2347/2017 and 2348/2017, http://www.refworld.org/cases,GRC_CS,5b1935024.html Accessed: 11-05-2021

illustrated the first widespread but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to deport Syrians from Lesbos in the past few years; by the end of 2019, only 43 Syrians were deported to Turkey because their asylum applications were considered as inadmissible in Lesbos.⁸

While the vast majority of migrants have managed to stay on European soil in the face of the impossibility of their removal, I assert that the designation of Turkey as a safe third country under the fast-track border procedure nevertheless allowed the EU border regime to achieve a vital objective against thousands of potential Syrian refugees: to legally immobilize them for years in distant Lesbos, a situation that would not have happened under the former Greek asylum structure.

Migrants of nationalities with low recognition rates (less than 25 per cent), however, were directly filtered into the Greek asylum examination process. While this pathway was posed to be fast due to an ‘expected rejection’ (Hänsel & Kasperek, 2020) by the Greek Asylum Office and EASO, the detention experiences of Jack and dozens of others I met let me see how border procedures turned out to be even more violent, slow, opaque, and confusing for these ‘economic migrants’ than for potential refugees like Syrians.

As mentioned above, Jack and hundreds of other ‘low profile migrants’ were never even able to start their formal asylum process and even less aspired to survive in spaces with less violent living conditions than Moria; consequently, individual cases of persecution and violence which were experienced by all these migrants were never examined.

Indeed, migrants with little recognition of asylum are the target of suspicion and seen as illegitimate. For example, in 2016, being Algerian was synonymous with being a violent migrant seeking an escape from poverty and for a way to benefit from the German security system, according to FRONTEX officials, the Greek Asylum Office and interlocutors I spoke with. But none of them knew that Jack was threatened with death if he did not collaborate with drug trafficking in an area under terrorist presence.

‘You arrive and it’s like Russian roulette. Europeans decide the future of migrants based on their statistics, calculators and computers,’ said Jack when he found out that Algerians could in no way pursue the relocation program to other European countries, and that he would have minimal chances of obtaining asylum as a detainee without legal guidance and humanitarian aid.

Further, my stay in Lesbos allowed me to see how minors, sick and elderly people from North African countries—vulnerable groups under Article 14(8) L 4375/2016 and therefore exempted from the fast-track border procedure in Lesbos—were not usually transferred to other safer spaces on the island such as ‘Kara Tepe’ for belonging to the nationalities of ‘bad Arabs’ as Jack and his companions used to complain.

To tell the truth, administrative detention of migrants requesting international protection at liberty was not allowed on Lesbos in 2016 by Article 46 of the then-new asylum law 4375/2016, which regulated these systematic practices in Greece. Like Jack, thousands of migrants of nationalities with low acceptance rates orally manifested the will for protection as soon as they arrived on Lesbos, which automatically made them asylum seekers prior to their arrests and without knowing it; therefore, I agree with Saranti (2019) in considering these detentions as illegal.

⁸ UNHCR Greece, 2019, Returns from Greece to Turkey in the framework of the EU-TUR Statement, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/73295> Accessed: 11-05-2021

However, the scaffolding of this law was designed to contour humanitarian law in that it outlawed those ‘bad Arabs’ under the legal justification of belonging to undesirable nationalities and thus constituting a danger to European security and the international public order. Jack was subjected to what Balibar (1991) has termed as ‘cultural racism’ whose socio-cultural classifications such as class, religion and nationality are actualized and attached to non-white races such as North African Arabs—never conceived as potential refugees but as Islamist threats to European security in the current context of global border securitization.

Therefore, I consider that the fast-track border procedure has generated in these years a self-fulfilling prophecy (Saranti, 2019) for the ‘low profile migrants’ in that the precarious detention conditions imposed substantially affect the reduction of possibilities for adequate preparation for the desired asylum interview—a phase that few in fact reach. Thus, the low acceptance rates of these nationalities are intentionally and continuously perpetuated by the Greek Asylum Office under the intervention of EASO, leading to a permanent illegalization of those ‘economic migrants.’ For Jack and thousands of North Africans, access to the law is like a mirage: Whenever he sought information about his rights, Jack ran into closed doors or rebuffs. He could only imagine from afar the few experts of the EASO and Greek Asylum Service who were almost always overwhelmed and often absent from their headquarters in Moria.

Although potential refugee Syrians whose suffering is backed by international media coverage of the conflicts they are fleeing from are a little more likely to obtain international protection in Greece, both migrants with high and low asylum recognition rates were placed in a zone of deportability (De Genova, 2002) and legal uncertainty as soon as they arrive in Moria due to the effects of the EU–Turkey Deal. In conclusion, I assert then that the fast-track border procedure under the new asylum law 4375/2016 is subjecting virtually all asylum seekers on Lesbos to processes of illegalization, immobility, and the possibility of deportation along the lines of nationality and race, with the aim to making them voluntarily renounce their right to asylum. Under coercion and assistance of the European Union, this procedure is an attempt of a legally institutionalized machine of *refoulement* so that the power to deport or impose that possibility is the cornerstone of this procedure, which generates feelings of anxiety, worry, suffering, and anger among migrants.

4 Black holes, racisms, and anti-black policing in the ruins of empire

In the ‘Kara Tepe’ camp, I regularly interacted with migrants mostly from Arab and Central Asian countries living there. I also used to hang out with North African migrants like Jack who, after finishing their long detention processes in Moria, occasionally went out fishing, walking, and demonstrating in the streets of Mytilene. But after two months in Lesbos, I had spoken little with black migrants from West Africa although I knew there were hundreds in Moria. So I wondered: Why were there only 20 people from Congo, Cameroon and Central Africa in a camp for 1,000 people like Kara Tepe? What was their application process for international protection like? Was their real absence from the streets of Lesbos due to a racial issue?

Therefore, I decided to call Hiroshima, a Congolese friend of Jack who led me inside

that camp through a small hole in the fence covered by colorful clothes drying in the dim sunlight. Upon arriving at this clandestine entrance, well-known among the Black refugees from West Africa, we walked directly to the ground level section, under the open sky—the *African area*, as some of them called it. The landscape was bleak: dozens of thin fabric tents and UNHCR prefabricated tents, where hundreds of people lived, made up this place muddied by recent rains and strewn with garbage and even feces, creating a foul smell as a result of the outrageous absence of toilets in the area. The paths formed between the tents were full of improvised clotheslines, people smoking and playing dominoes in plastic chairs, and women cooking with firewood. At the end of this passage, a small, improvised church made of wood and a translucent rubber roof allowed you to see the silhouettes of several people on their knees praying. Upon reaching his friends' tent, Hiroshima let me in and introduced me to Nagasaki.

He—as well as dozens of his fellows from Cameroon, Congo, Senegal, or Mali—had been in Moria for more than eight months when we met, and he said that he had not yet had contact with the authorities in Lesbos. Being politically persecuted, they lamented being racialized by the Greek Asylum Office and EASO because they were Black and did not deserve international protection as they were considered only as 'economic migrants.' Many of these migrants said they were being ignored by the Greek state, the EU, and UNHCR, and they only recently had been able to do a part of the Registry and the digital fingerprints, with many things still missing.

'They don't favor Africans, much less us Black people. There are no concessions for us. It is a racist system that privileges white skin and Arabs fleeing mediatized wars—why are we not human to them? We live with our women and children here. We are also vulnerable,' Nagasaki said complaining that Europe remains colonial for them. These statements were telling to me because this was the first time in two months that I was seeing many groups of Black West African asylum seekers, except for a couple of Congolese family in 'Kara Tepe' whose director always said that Black Africans were solo migrant travelers and that this is why they are not sent to his camp. However, in this area, I saw dozens of families, elderly people, and children, and there were only a few tents donated by UNHCR.

In this violent context of riots and death and after having visited this area under the guidance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I could see better how Moria, a militarized and prison-like camp, operated similarly under a concentrated organizational system carried out by the Greek State, the European Union, and in cooperation with the humanitarian framework. Inspired by Suárez (2015), I conceived the Black Western African area as a black hole⁹ of Moria. What is a black hole? I propose that it can be understood as a fragmented border space (Hänsel, 2020) where displaced Black bodies from the former European African colonies are racialized¹⁰ and dehumanized through practices such as policing, isolation, and abandonment. These practices converge under opaque, changing, and illegible legal frameworks as the Greek Asylum procedure, creating 'grey zones' (Knudsen & Frederiksen, 2015), where the limits between legal and illegal are blurred for the restric-

⁹ A term coined by Liliana Suárez (2015), who conceives the Mediterranean as a paradigmatic space, where the lack of protection for migrants reflects the current restriction of rights and the European process of entrenchment.

¹⁰ Weheliye (2014, p. 3) understands racialization 'not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into I humans, not-quite-humans and non-humans.'

tion of all types of rights, the physiological violence, the abandonment of humanitarian aid, promoting exposure to social (Cacho, 2012) and physical death of those who are entered into its gravitational field.

The black holes are those ruins of empire (Stoler, 2013) located in the limits of the Global North that could not be externalized outside the borders of Europe, so they are framed in a historical continuity of spatial re-actualization of specific violence against racialized bodies as Blacks (Mbembe, 2003). Therefore, I believe that they are not exceptional and novel spaces in the context of global securitization of borders but rather constantly renewed practices that derive from the colonial system of white supremacy originated in the enslavement of non-Western societies. What I want to highlight about Moria's black hole is its racial specificity in these borders where race, torture, and the phenomenon of mass incarceration are resurfacing as central problems in the international order. Speaking with Mbembe (2016, p. 25), I agree that 'procedures of differentiation, classification, and hierarchy for purposes of exclusion, expulsion, and even eradication are being reactivated throughout the world' as is the case of the Black West African area in particular. Thus, the black hole, and more broadly Moria, is part of the burgeoning enclosure industry, or processes of zoning, in border areas—whose practices consist of isolating and enclosing thousands of people in controlled spaces.

This leads me to Gilmore (2007, p. 28) in situating racism in the black hole and, more broadly, Moria as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.' The extreme violence materialized in the deaths of 2016 and the social death (Cacho, 2012) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki relegated to what Fanon (1963) conceptualizes as zones of not being constituted only a few cases among thousands of people from the Global South in the last years. Indeed, Fitzpatrick (1987) and Goldberg (2015) have affirmed that the race construct has ordered the primary Western socio-legal definitions and structures, evidenced by the fact that racism is not only compatible with the law but is inherent to the rule of law itself. Questioning this liberal vision of law, Goldberg (2015, p. 7) has pointed out that racism historically 'materialized as an expression of dehumanization as the geography of modern Europe took shape. Race established the lines of belonging and estrangement for modern European social (and legal) life [...] and was invoked to delineate a European 'we,' in defining contrast with those considered its constitutive outsiders.'

In this vein and more specifically, Wilderson (2003) asserts that the seizure and reification of the Black body during slavery was through gratuitous, non-contingent and instrumental violence for its suffering and dehumanization in this foundational scenario of modernity. This powerful argument dismantles the humanist conception of Western violence as a contingent, and defensive resource to locate it rather as an offensive and punitive methodology that places the Black body outside the category of the human since the very beginning of modernity, as proposed by Saucier and Woods (2014). Drawing on these authors, I therefore consider that asylum seekers like Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not only violently abandoned and illegalized for having arrived irregularly in Europe in the wake of the EU-Turkey Deal. Rather, their Black bodies daring to be/being outside of Africa at the gates of the former empire exposed them to the racist and gratuitous violence that precedes any of their acts in a white supremacist order. Thus, black holes are specifically governed primarily by the motivation and duty of the 'culture of anti-Black policing estab-

lished by slavery' codified through the fast-track border procedure, thus legalizing spatial confinement and humanitarian abandon for the perpetuation of dehumanization (Saucier & Woods, 2014, p. 62). Nagasaki's words as well as those of his companions from inside a crowded and small tent on the mud of winter rains while trying to warm up support these painful arguments: 'Here nobody listens to us, nobody sees us, we are not treated as political refugees [...] people die for anything. We have many things to say because in our countries they persecute us for political ideas.'

While Jack was intensely illegalized, placed in the deportability zone (De Genova, 2002) by FRONTEX in the Pre-removal Center and forced to voluntarily renounce his right to asylum after being racialized as a 'bad Arab' of an undesirable nationality, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as several of their peers, were rendered neglected, abandoned and dehumanized as a product of the most primordial racism based on biological classifications in the most hidden layers of Moria. Like dozens of Black migrants with low asylum recognition rates, Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not need to be locked up in the Pre-removal Center or located under the specter of deportability like Jack because their bodies were previously illegalized and racialized centuries ago. They were not visible and humane enough to be subject to the fast-track border procedure, to overly interventionist powers in a reduced capacity prison (420 people), nor to sufficient humanitarian aid. Instead, they were openly excised from the human realm in the black holes for years until they were finally considered to begin their asylum process as an effect of the recurring riots, fires and anti-racist demonstrations.

While both Jack, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki were variously illegalized and racialized but similarly subjected to degrading forms of violence without succeeding in applying for international protection, their experiences revealed how the Greek asylum process, under the effects of the EU-Turkey statement, is based on a complex racialized and white supremacist structure that conceives, reproduces and perpetuates a clear and historical hierarchy of different types of humans based on both phenotypical and cultural differences, thus structuring them as threatening, dangerous or simply inferior and expendable. In the race relations of power in Moria, the black hole is the hidden and more savage face of the EU border regime behind the external administrative sophistication and legal denseness of the Greek asylum process.

Categorized as migrants, asylum seekers, or potential refugees, the de-racialized and neutral terminology (De Genova, 2017) fed by agencies such as, FRONTEX, the Greek Asylum Office, and EASO deny that the asylum process—that is, the law—is racist. The multiple agents with whom I spoke justify a rigorous and strict asylum process mainly on humanitarian and security grounds: they conceive the asylum process first and foremost as a necessary and selective filter of merit based on suffering legitimized by EASO, the Greek Asylum Office and more generally white European populations in a context of economic crisis, precariousness in the Euro-Mediterranean zone, omitting aspects such as xenophobia and islamophobia. Genova (2017) and Balibar (1991) have argued that, although the hegemonic discourses on migration in Europe have historically denied and disguised the racial question under the categories of migrants and refugees, the tens of thousands of corpses of non-white bodies in the Mediterranean and the dead in the Moria camp during the last years strongly evidence the racial specificity of the systematic production of death by the European border regime. I thus encourage challenging the de-racializing discourses

in Lesbos and more broadly the historical absence, dissimulation, and denial of race and racism in research on borders, migrations, and the State.

Beyond the racial hierarchies based on both biological and cultural classifications for the selection of a reduced percentage of protection deservers, I end by stating that, ultimately, the totality of the migrants from Moria have been subjected to a process of indefinite immobility in Lesbos that prevents them from pursuing their life projects. The detention and deportability of Jack, the abandonment and dehumanization of Congolese migrants like Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the deaths of the Iraqi migrants on November 25th, 2016, reflect the differentiated effects of racism, with anti-Black policing (Saucier & Woods, 2014) being the most visceral form of violence exerted by the Greek state and the EU. Likewise, the Greek asylum procedure has highlighted how the different groups racialized by white supremacy are undeniably experiencing ‘the becoming Black of the world’ (Mbembe, 2016): the order to bend to the imperial and slave logic, which at other times was reserved only for the Black subject.

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