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# Remains of Rescue and Confinement: Humanitarian Bordering in Lampedusa

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Guest post by *Karina Horsti*, Academy of Finland Fellow, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä. Over the past 15 years she has studied media and culture in the contexts of migration, cultural diversity, and humanitarianism. Karina's current project, *Remembering migration: Memory politics of forced migration in mediated societies* (2014–2019), examines public remembering of migration and bordering in cultural productions in Europe.

On the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean, wooden fishing boats rest on the ground, monumental and silent. Abandoned objects lay scattered around the boats: water bottles, deflated dinghies, shoes, piles of clothes, and life vests. The remaining parts of flashlights, mobile phones, and food packaging reveal that those who made the crossing prepared for the risky journey. These objects evoke imaginaries of individuality and intimacy. I wonder if the child whose inflated floating device left in the bush survived. Is it her parents' breath what remains inside? A child has lost her little doll; is she still looking for it?



CONFISCATED BOATS USED BY MIGRANTS REST ON THE ISLAND OF LAMPEDUSA. (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)



DISCARDED FLASHLIGHT (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)



DISCARDED SHOES (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)

This scene of rescue and humanitarian aid opens on the back of ex-NATO base Loran in a remote corner of the island of Lampedusa in Italy. From 2008 to 2011, particularly during the so-called ‘emergency of North Africa’ in 2011, the Ministry of Interior operated a temporary reception center for migrants in this un-used military base. That year marks a peak in the number of irregular arrivals through maritime routes to Italy: the region of Sicily, including Lampedusa, [received 57,181 migrants](#). Loran was to manage this ‘humanitarian emergency,’ but it wasn’t designed as a reception center and didn’t function as one. About 400 migrants, including 250 unaccompanied minors, were held in Loran, a place that was [officially supposed to accommodate 180 people](#). The main center on the island was also overcrowded. NGOs, activists, and European parliamentarians intervened, arguing that the conditions didn’t meet ‘humanitarian standards;’ the space didn’t look, function, or feel like a humanitarian zone. European parliamentarians raised concerns of illegal detention and low sanitary standards. [Activists](#) reported that the site still functioned as a military zone: the Coast Guard and Carabinieri moved around and used the base for their own purposes. The architecture of the former military base served the twin purposes of confinement and surveillance—a situation that has been linked to the [transformations](#) of many old military spaces into migrant detention and reception facilities in Italy.



THE MILITARY BASE KNOWN AS LORAN HOSTED THE UNITED STATES COAST GUARD'S LORAN-C NAVIGATION TRANSMITTER FROM 1972 TO 1994 AFTER WHICH THE ITALIAN MILITARY TOOK OVER THE BASE. (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)

Today the decayed ex-NATO base invites curious explorers and is accessible only through trespassing. It has evolved into an alternative site of conscience for activists who are drawn to the island, which globally represents a key 'border spectacle.' In the past decade, Lampedusa has repeatedly figured in international media as the site where bordering performances are played out: for example, the 'emergency' of 2011, the Frontex Hermes operation in 2013, and the commemoration rituals of the shipwreck on 3 October 2013. These spectacles shaped Lampedusa into a symbolic edge of Europe. In addition, as [Nicholas De Genova](#) and [Gianluca Gatta](#) have observed, such 'border spectacles' are performative mechanisms which differentiate people into categories, such as 'illegals' and 'victims.'

In recent years, as [William Walters has argued](#), a neo-pastoral governmentality in the form of humanitarian rationality has grown within the European border regime. Managing the movement of people and controlling the border is now framed in terms of alleviating suffering: 'saving lives,' 'rescue,' and 'protecting vulnerable groups.' Humanitarian border management, advocated by intergovernmental organizations such as [Frontex](#) and [IOM](#), extends the scope of border management beyond nation-state actors and multiplies the agents participating in the border spectacle. In addition to inter-governmental agencies, transnational humanitarian organizations have gained a growing presence in the making of the border, fusing the logics of border securitization with those of humanitarianism, producing a new 'humanitarian' border regime.

The abandoned two-story ex-military base speaks to this merger of humanitarian and securitized rationales in the border regime. While Loran wasn't officially a closed migrant detention center, its architecture retains a strong feeling of confinement. The barbed wire fence surround the area, the concrete yard, and the desolate surroundings make one feel the gaze of authority. The check-point at the gate manifests a structure of surveillance and control. These remnants of securitized authority concerned the humanitarian agents in 2011 by conflicting with their idea of a proper border regime.



A DELEGATION OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARIANS REPORTED IN 2011 FROM LORAN: 'THE ROOMS WERE FULL OF MATTRESSES PLACED DIRECTLY ON THE GROUND.' (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)

Loran also contains signs of a humanitarian authority that governed the migrants by the logics of protection and alleviation of suffering. One room, for example, carries testimony of sanitization and health screening: a medical inspection table and a refrigerator for vaccines sit abandoned, while medical documents and x-rays lay on the floor. The border regime at Loran involved care for the migrants but also screening for possible health risks at this remote post before letting them move forward. The ruins of the nurse's room depict the fusion of the humanitarian and securitized rationales of the border at Loran.



MEDICAL DOCUMENTS DISCARDED IN THE RUINED NURSE'S ROOM IN LORAN. (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)

I find a card for checking out the meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner were provided at scheduled hours. Meals were distributed in sealed plastic containers, which now lay discarded around the building. These objects reveal the way in which humanitarian confinement controls eating and nutrition. Cooking wasn't allowed and eating was narrowed down from an important social and cultural behavior to the bare act of staying alive. This practice also communicates the logic of humanitarianism as an unexpected emergency and a temporal solution, which direct attention away from politics, continuities, and histories of border regimes. A fitting symbol for humanitarian emergency is a small plastic bag containing a tiny toothpaste, toothbrush, and shampoo, titled 'Last Minute' in English.

Amongst the rubble on the floor is a poster filled with photographs of migrants smiling, playing games, and posing in groups with white European aid workers. A sticker that says '*Living together: vivere insieme e possibile – Giovani per la Pace*' (Living together is possible – Youth for Peace), is glued in the middle of the poster. A private co-operative, *Lampedusaccoglienza* (literally translated as 'Lampedusa welcome'), that ran the center left its signature stickers and logos around the building. These are some of the humanitarian agents that the state commissioned to care for the migrants, and to produce a confinement that was prominently humanitarian.



LIVING TOGETHER: PHOTOGRAPHS OF HUMANITARIAN VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES IN LORAN. (PHOTO: © K. HORSTI, 2014)

The decaying Loran urges me to consider why the center wasn't reopened in 2014 when the numbers of migrants taking the sea route increased again. Certainly, at the time, there was public concern about the inhumane conditions in the crowded center. For instance, delegations headed by the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie and [European parliamentarians](#) raised the humanitarian deficiencies. However, Italy has since relaxed its politics of bordering and revolted against the Dublin agreement by facilitating migrants' movement towards Northern European countries. The nationalities in the statistics of 'boat arrivals' and asylum seekers in Italy don't match. Although Syrians and Eritreans are the [top nationalities](#) to arrive in Italy, they seek asylum elsewhere, mainly in [Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland](#). Nigerians and Malians are the top asylum seekers in Italy. All of the Eritreans I spoke with in Rome this summer said that after being rescued, Italian agents had asked their preference about registering. Whereas Loran, situated on the remote island of Lampedusa, might have served the purposes of confinement in a certain border regime, it doesn't meet the needs of the kind of unofficial porous border regime that's now taking shape in Italy.

See Karina's related blog post, '[Psychogeographies of Lampedusa](#),' in which she discusses race and gender in exploring Loran.

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