

## **The human despite all**

### **From the abyss of Libyan detention to the forging of commonality through struggles**

Charles Heller, 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2022.<sup>1</sup>

*Why am I joining a demonstration in solidarity with migrants and refugees in Libya in front of the UNHCR in Geneva on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of December? What may seem like the simplest of questions conjures a series of far more challenging ones. At stake are nothing less than the recognition of the depth of the wounds born by those who have been denied their humanity in Libya, how and why this should concern us all, and what humans might become in struggling together against and across the boundaries that cut across our life in common.*

## **Segen and me**

Why do I believe it is essential that I, and others, join a demonstration in solidarity with migrants and refugees in Libya in front of the UNHCR in Geneva on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of December? As I ponder answers to this question, the mental image of Segen imposes itself on me. I never met Segen, but his photograph circulated in the press and is still imprinted on my memory several years after. His dark and emaciated face is portrayed in the shade, but his eyes stand out. His gaze feels empty and yet I feel him staring at me.

Segen (whose real name was Tesfalidet Tesfom) was a 22 year old Eritrean man. He crossed the sea from Libya, where he had spent 19 months in detention. He was disembarked from the ship of the Spanish NGO Open Arms on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2018 in Pozzallo, Sicily. Upon his arrival, he weighed only 30 kilos. The day after he set foot in Italy, he died of malnutrition and from an advanced state of tuberculosis which had perforated his lung.

I would like to know more about who Segen was, about his trajectory of life before arriving in Libya, about what made him happy or sad, what he aspired to. To date, the work of journalists has mostly focused on the ordeal he faced in Libya. Merawy, a friend of Segen who saw him in hospital just before he passed away, recalled to Alessandro Puglia Segen's last words. "He barely had a whisper of voice and in those brief moments he confessed that it was Libya that had killed him. He told me that all the migrants were crammed in a room in the detention camp of Bani-Walid, they urinated and emptied their bowels in the same room, the women were sexually abused, the men were beaten, nobody could wash and he was fed once or twice a day. Then the doctors told me to go away and Segen died shortly after".<sup>2</sup> In a cruel twist of fate, Segen had survived and escaped captivity, crossed the deadly sea, arrived finally on European soil where he may have hoped to find some degree of protection and safety, only to be caught up by the lasting effects of the violence he had been subjected to for too long.

I never met Segen and yet I will never forget him. As I stared at the photograph picturing his emaciated face and in his empty gaze, I – and others such as Eritrean priest Father Mussie Zerai - recognized the faces of the survivors of Nazi death camps. Maybe because the Holocaust has become the paradigm of absolute evil in Europe and North America, and maybe because I recognize that as a result of my partly Jewish family, at another time, that emaciated face could have been mine, I was moved to tears. That shock of recognition, despite the privileges I have today as result of the whiteness of my skin and Swiss citizenship, and the difficult questions it

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<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Puglia, "The Libyan inferno in Segen's poems", *Vita*, 14 September 2018, <http://www.vitainternational.media/en/story/2018/09/14/the-libyan-inferno-in-segens-poems/11/>

spurs, have stayed with me since, and I feel the need to write and reflect upon them today. At stake are nothing less than the recognition of the depth of the wounds born by those who have been denied their humanity in Libya, how and why this should concern us all, and what humans might become in struggling together against and across the boundaries that cut across our life in common.

### **The ambivalent politics of comparison**

Do I and others need to see the faces of yesterday's Jewish survivors in the faces of today's migrants, and of black people in particular, to be able to recognize their humanity? Is this projection and comparison necessary to recognize the scale of the violence that those seeking to escape Libya are subjected to? If so, for who and why is it necessary? Whether I like it or not, from the perspective of my position and personal history, I cannot deny that the photograph of Segen and the flash of the connection across people, places and times it crystalized for me, led me to see his face in a different light – a terrifying one.

Is the comparison between Libya's migrant detention camps and Nazi death camps a justified one? What are the risks and problems that arise in the process? As horrifying as it may be, the violence inflicted upon migrants in Libya today does not aim at extermination. But comparison does not amount to simple equation. It rather involves the careful assessment of similarities and differences towards the understanding of distinct situations. Beyond this however, comparing Libya's migrant detention camps with Nazi camps risks reinstating the Holocaust as the single paradigm of absolute evil against which all past and present crimes should be measured.<sup>3</sup> This is a status I would refuse and resist, for the hierarchies of sufferings it establishes, and the way it can in turn be used to legitimize the dispossession and oppression of Palestinian people.<sup>4</sup>

Another historical connection was drawn – and felt viscerally – by black people across the world when, in November 2017, CNN broadcast a video showing the labour of black subjects being auctioned on the outskirts of Tripoli. The auction recalled tragically the fate of black people captured, shipped, sold and exploited as slaves across the Atlantic, but also across the Sahara and the Mediterranean, a trade for which Libyan ports had operated as important nodes.<sup>5</sup> These images, which gave a new visibility to a reality that had been documented since several years, spurred public outrage and demonstrations led by black people across the world.<sup>6</sup> Was this historical comparison and connection more accurate and relevant than that with the fate of Jews? I would not want to choose one over the other, but rather, as Michael Rothberg has suggested, emphasize instead the possible multidirectionality of entangled relations with the past.<sup>7</sup> I would further consider that any comparison or genealogy connecting past and present must be assessed carefully for what it reveals and conceals. If the comparison with Nazi camps may shed light on the striping of rights and inhuman practices detained migrants are subjected to in the exclusionary architectural and political form of the camp, the comparison with historical forms of slavery rather brings to the fore the dimensions of objectification, domination and exploitation. What both revealed in common was the role of race in shaping the extreme dehumanization migrants trapped in Libya are subjected today.

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<sup>3</sup> See Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity*, Pluto Press, 2016. Yitzhak Laor, *The Myths of Liberal Zionism*, Verso, New York, NY, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Gil Z. Hochberg, "Edward Said: "The Last Jewish Intellectual"", *Social Text* 87, Vol. 24, No. 2, Summer 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the genealogies of slavery and race across the Mediterranean, see Gabriele Proglia et al., *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> João Gabriell, "Free Our Brothers!": On the Politicization of Slavery in Libya within the French Context. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2019 118 (3): pp. 686–693.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford University Press, 2009.

## Words beyond words

Is the comparison with past crimes against humanity the only way we can see – and acknowledge deep in our conscience – the horrendous crime that is being perpetrated in Libya against our fellow humans? How can we take the measure of the horror and come together to do everything that is in our power to bring to an end the violence migrants are subject to in Libya – as well as the EU’s outsourcing of border control to the Libyan coast guard that channel migrants into it? Historical comparison may be a necessary experience and strategy at a time when the quantity and public availability of information on violence in Libya has been dissociated from any reaction strong enough to bring it to an end. The multiple and widespread forms of inhuman treatment Segen described and which Libyan state actors as well as armed groups, criminal gangs and militias perpetrate against migrants were already well documented at the time of his death.<sup>8</sup> In 2017 the humanitarian organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) interviewed 70 migrants who had been pulled-back by the Libyan coast guard at least once. Among them, 19 (27%) had experienced violence during the interception, and 39 (56%) experienced violence, torture, or other ill-treatment in the place they were taken to upon arrival in Libya.<sup>9</sup> The findings were echoed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who denounced on 11 September 2017 the “horrific abuses migrants face after being intercepted and returned to Libya.”<sup>10</sup> Even European government officials, such as Italy’s Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mario Giro, admitted on 6 August 2017, that bringing migrants back to Libya “means taking them back to hell”.<sup>11</sup> Crimes against migrants in Libya have been documented in further detail since. No later than June 2022 the UN Human Rights Council’s Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya concluded that there were “reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity are being committed against migrants in Libya”.<sup>12</sup> *Crimes against humanity*. Crimes that not only violate their direct victims, but, because of their gravity and the groups they target, cut through the very fabric that binds humans together.<sup>13</sup>

Neither the meticulous factual analysis of violence against migrants in Libya or the use of the strongest normative language to qualify these crimes seem to lead to the electrifying realization of the scale and gravity of the violence being perpetrated. What may be the cause of this apparent numbness to accounts of migrants’ suffering? Are we desensitized by the multiplication of accounts of brutal situations across the world? Do the racial, class and citizenship hierarchies that shapes public perception in the global north lead to the relegation of migrants in Libya within an inhumanity that is not worth grieving and thus not worth saving?<sup>14</sup> Do the political imperatives of European states seeking to prevent migrants from the global south from accessing Europe exceed any and all human cost? Is there any way to break

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<sup>8</sup> For the extent of available knowledge at the time see Amnesty International, ‘Libya’s Dark web of Collusion: Abuses Against Europe-Bound Refugees and Migrants’, 11 December 2017, Index: MDE 19/7561/2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/7561/2017/en/>, p.56.

<sup>9</sup> MSF 2017 data shared with the author and included in Forensic Oceanography’s “Mare Clausum” report. <https://content.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2018-05-07-FO-Mare-Clausum-full-EN.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Council, 36th session, Opening Statement by Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 11 September 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22041>

<sup>11</sup> Marco Menduni, ‘Giro: “Fare rientrare quelle persone vuol dire condannarle all’inferno”’, *La Stampa*, 6 August 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/08/06/italia/cronache/giro-fare-rientrare-quelle-per-sone-vuol-dire-condannarle-allinferno-SXnGzVlzftF17fNGFCMADN/pagina.html>

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Council, Fiftieth session, 13 June–8 July 2022, Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/regularsession/session50/2022-06-29/A\\_HRC\\_50\\_63\\_AdvanceUneditedVersion.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/regularsession/session50/2022-06-29/A_HRC_50_63_AdvanceUneditedVersion.docx)

<sup>13</sup> David Luban, “A Theory of Crimes Against Humanity”, *Yale Journal of International Law*, 29 (2004): 85-167. Itamar Mann, Border Crimes as Crimes against humanity, in Cathryn Costello, Michelle Foster, and Jane McAdam (eds), *The Oxford Handbook for International Refugee Law*, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London, 2009.

through the boundaries that have been drawn across humanity or tilt the scales of political calculations?

It certainly appears that the careful piecing together of facts by human rights actors in and of itself is no longer up to the task. But the methodologies of human rights investigations are not the sole modalities of truth production. Michel Foucault believed that while scientific truth could be patiently assembled as the fragmented pieces of a puzzle, truth production had operated differently in the past. For ancient oracles or doctors, truth could also impose itself as ruptural event, one that cut through reality and our perception as lighting striking, illuminating the world through its flash.<sup>15</sup> Today, we may see this evental rather than demonstrative truth at work in art and poetry. This is certainly the effect I feel reading writers such as Edouard Glissant or Patrick Chamoiseau, who connect the abyss of the Atlantic that swallowed the bodies of yesterday's slaves to that awaiting migrants crossing the Mediterranean today.<sup>16</sup> It is also the effect of the poetry written on scraps of paper by migrants detained in Libya such as Segen himself,<sup>17</sup> or Abdel Wahab Yousif, a Sudanese poet also known as 'Latinos' who died crossing the sea in Summer 2020.

*In Vain (Abdel Wahab Yousif)*

*You are destined to meet your fate, Today, tomorrow, or the day after.  
No one can stop the wheel of destruction*

*Crushing over the body of life.  
It is all in vain, nothing, no salvation will come,  
To rescue the world's corpse.  
All in vain, no flicker of light to scare the darkness. In vain, everything is dying:  
Time, Language, screams, dreams, songs*

*Love and music.  
In vain, everything is gone,  
Except the vacuous hustle of violence  
Of dead bodies wrapped in dismal silence  
And of a hellish destruction pouring from the throat of heaven.<sup>18</sup>*

Segen and Latinos's words live on after they have left us. The courage and strength they mustered to rescue these words from the depth of the Libyan abyss and write them letter after letter on scraps of paper as frail as their bodies, imposes on us the courage to listen to and feel the weight of each one these sentences. It also imposes on us the effort to understand what political processes have led to the creation of this "wheel of destruction" crushing migrants' bodies and lives, so that it may be interrupted.

## **Europe's multi-layered responsibility**

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, 23 January 1974 lecture in Psychiatric Power, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–74, (G. Burchell, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. I thank Mathieu Potte-Bonneville for flagging out this lecture.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, "Lampedusa: ce que nous disent les gouffres", *Mediapart*, 11 Octobre 2013, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/patrick-chamoiseau/blog/111013/lampedusa-ce-que-nous-disent-les-gouffres>

<sup>17</sup> For Segen's poems, see Alessandro Puglia, "The Libyan inferno in Segen's poems", *Vita*, 14 September 2018, <http://www.vitainternational.media/en/story/2018/09/14/the-libyan-inferno-in-segens-poems/11/>

<sup>18</sup> This poem was translated by the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone. For Abdel Wahab Yousif's poems, see [https://abdawalhablatinos.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR1H9HqUxfDRUrzOD12aRBNj9OxC6zZx5yAKzF3j\\_20AykAtQDvHiFA7pUs](https://abdawalhablatinos.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR1H9HqUxfDRUrzOD12aRBNj9OxC6zZx5yAKzF3j_20AykAtQDvHiFA7pUs)

The characterisation of Libya as a “hell” risks contributing to the reproduction of the colonial division of the world between a civilized Europe and an uncivilized rest in which brutal violence is the norm. However, beyond the responsibility of Libyan actors who have been directly inflicting violence onto migrants, the EU and its member states have played a fundamental role in creating the conditions for these crimes to occur, and in perpetuating them.

Europe has a multi-layered responsibility for the violence migrants, and black people in particular, are being subjected to in Libya on a daily basis. One level is related to deep historical responsibility, as Tendayi Achiume has argued in a series of articles on “migration as decolonization”.<sup>19</sup> European empires have created the extractive and exploitative connections binding Europe to the global south, which the colonized subjects of yesterday follow today as illegalized migrants in seeking to access the “spoils of empire” the colonisers took with them.<sup>20</sup> Colonization and the racial division of humanity at its core further involved practices of uninhibited violence which have left an enduring legacy in postcolonial states.<sup>21</sup> In the wake of national independences, military strong men such as Kaddafi have perpetuated forms of authoritarian and extractive rule in which violence continues to be mobilised as regular modality of government.<sup>22</sup> It is hard not to see in the violence migrants’ are subjected to in Libya’s camps today the discontinuous legacy of the concentration camps fascist Italy erected in Eastern Libya nearly a century ago, in which several tens of thousands Libyans died.<sup>23</sup>

More recently, along with the USA, European states have played a fundamental role in the NATO-led military intervention against the Kaddafi regime. The killing of Kaddafi and the fall of his regime sent Libya (and neighbouring countries) into a spiral of political turmoil and violence from which it has still not re-emerged. This has created a fragmented political landscape in which a range of actors compete for control over territory and resources – among which the bodies and lives of migrants.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of the EU’s discriminatory migration policies – which allocate differentially the right to access EU territory according to a matrix of citizenship, class, and race – the majority of migrants from the global south are refused visas, which in turn deprives them of access to safe and legal means of transport.<sup>25</sup> To travel across borders irregularly, illegalized migrants have no other choice then to resort to traders in the commerce of illegalized passage. While these exist across a broad spectrum, in Libya smugglers and militias have come together to form a violent assemblage which deprives migrants of their freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, a fundamental level of responsibility of the EU and its member states is the apparatus of outsourced border control it has created, and which has been the focus of several of our investigations within the Forensic Oceanography project and which we are continuing to

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<sup>19</sup> Tendayi Achiume, “The Postcolonial Case for Rethinking Borders”, *Dissent* 2019, 66.3: pp.27-32.

<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-postcolonial-case-for-rethinking-borders>

<sup>20</sup> Nadine El Nahny, “Britain as the spoils of empire”, *Migration Mobilities Bristol*, University of Bristol, 15 June 2021,

<https://migration.bristol.ac.uk/2021/06/15/britain-as-the-spoils-of-empire/>

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine*, Karthala, Paris, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> For a useful summary, see Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, University of California Press, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> According to Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, in 1929, over 110,000 Libyans, the total population of rural Eastern Libya, was interned in concentration camps. By 1934, only 40,000 were left alive amid widespread executions, suicide, starvation, and disease. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History*. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Porsia, “Irregular migration and Libya: is the crisis over?”, in *Navigating the Pandemic : The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean*, *ISPI*, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion see Charles Heller, *De-confine Borders: Towards a Politics of Freedom of Movement in the Time of the Pandemic*, *Mobilities*, Volume 16, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Micallef, “The Human Conveyor Belt : trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya”, *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, March 2017, <http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global-initiative-human-conveyor-belt-human-smug-gling-in-libya-march-2017.pdf>

document today through the Border Forensics agency.<sup>27</sup> Since 2016, the EU and its member states – Italy in particular – have outsourced border control to the Libyan Coast Guard so that they intercept migrants attempting to escape Libya. This has resulted in more than 100.000 people being captured at sea and brought back to violence and detention since 2017.

Crimes against humanity not only at Europe’s doorstep, but, to a large extent, of Europe’s own making. I can only imagine the responsibility of Libyan and European actors will be recognized one day – as one may hope from several ongoing complaints in front of different courts, and if not from the tribunal of history.<sup>28</sup> But future accountability is of no comfort for those who suffer torture today. The “wheel of destruction” described by Latinos – the mechanisms of which extend across both shores of the Mediterranean, must be blocked *now*.

## David against the UNHCR

I will never forget Segen, even though I never met him. But I did meet many other people who survived Libya’s camps and the Mediterranean crossing EU policies have made so deadly. One of them, David Yambio, whom I encountered recently, made a lasting impression on me. David, a 25-year-old man from South Sudan, had only recently arrived in Italy – on his third attempt at the escaping Libya since 2019 – when we met at a conference in Bologna in Summer 2022. As we discussed the evolution of border violence and struggles across the central Mediterranean, David spoke eloquently of his involvement in the “Refugees in Libya” movement. Despite what he has gone through, he appeared to me at first remarkably calm and even joyful. After the conference, as we walked through the town in the night, he subtly revealed some of the darker sides of his experience. As I asked him about his personal plans and aspirations now that he was in Italy, he answered “I don’t know. In Libya I lost the capacity to dream – all I had were nightmares”.

David has told his story many a time.<sup>29</sup> He fled the civil war in South Sudan when he was 19. After spending two years in Chad, where his status as refugee was recognized, he left for Libya, where he registered at the UNHCR hoping to be resettled to another country. But despite the regular claims by EU officials that in conjunction with their support to border control in Libya they support humanitarian assistance as well, the UNHCR’s capacity to protect the rights and lives of refugees is far from effective. Its office in Libya has a very limited capacity, and has restricted registration to only 9 nationalities (Oromo Ethiopians, Eritreans, Iraqis, Somalis, Syrians, Palestinians, and Sudanese from Darfur), thus excluding many migrants from being able to seek any sort of protection. Even those who do fall within these groups receive little to no support and face the prospect of years of waiting in limbo as the UNHCR has only resettled 2455 people since 2017.<sup>30</sup> After three years of facing the cycle of interception, detention and violence in Libya, David, as many others, still had no answer from the UN agency. When, on the 1st of October 2021, Libyan police and military forces raided the Gargaresh neighbourhood

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<sup>27</sup> See in particular, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, “Mare Clausum, Italy and the EU’s undeclared operation to stem migration across the Mediterranean”, *Forensic Oceanography*, May 2018. <https://content.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2018-05-07-FO-Mare-Clausum-full-EN.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> For a review, see Annick Pijnenburg and Kris van der Pas, Strategic Litigation against European Migration Control Policies: The Legal Battleground of the Central Mediterranean Migration Route, *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 24(3), 2022, pp. 401-429. A new communication to the ICC has been filed recently by the ECCHR: <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/abfangen-von-migrantinnen-und-gefluechteten-auf-see-ein-verbuechen-gegen-die-menschlichkeit-istgh-muss-ermitteln/>

<sup>29</sup> In addition to our personal exchanges, I draw on Giansandro Merli, “Dai lager libici all’Italia, parla il leader dei rifugiati di Tripoli”, *Il Manifesto*, 24 June 2022, <https://ilmanifesto.it/dai-lager-libici-all-italia-parla-il-leader-dei-rifugiati-di-tripoli>

<sup>30</sup> The UNHCR’s data on resettlements can be accessed here: <https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#z6IN>. For an analysis of the limitations of and problems with the UNHCR’s activities in Libya see MSF, “Out of Libya: Opening Safe Pathways for Vulnerable Migrants Stuck in Libya”, June 2022, p.19, <https://msf.or.ke/en/publications/out-libya-opening-safe-pathways-vulnerable-migrants-stuck-libya> and the website of the Unfair Agency campaign: <https://unfairagency.org/unhcr/>.

in Tripoli, arbitrarily arresting and detaining thousands of migrants, David and others who narrowly escaped, gathered in front of the UNHCR in Tripoli. Together they claimed for their voices to be heard, for their lives and rights to be respected, and demanded to be protected in countries of safety. Believing that whoever leaves their home is a refugee regardless of the reasons for doing so, the movement for which David became one of the spokespersons called itself “Refugees in Libya”.<sup>31</sup> During 100 days nearly 2000 people sat in front of the UNHCR, forming what became one of the most impressive recent self-organised mobilisations led by migrants.<sup>32</sup> During this time, the voices of the “Refugees in Libya” movement and David’s in particular, resonated far beyond Tripoli, as they were amplified by the international press and several transnational migrant solidarity movements such as the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone and Mediterranean Sea. Despite this, and several rounds of negotiation with the UNHCR, their demands were ignored. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, the UNHCR decided to close its office. Shortly after the announcement, Libyan militias were deployed, brutally evicted the protesters and detained 600 of them. David narrowly escaped, but knowing that as a leader he was personally threatened, he remained in hiding until he managed to cross the sea. While the courageous protest of “Refugees in Libya” fell on the deaf ears of the UNHCR in Libya, David is continuing the struggle he led on European soil. On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2022, he is taking part of a sit-in in front of the UNHCR’s headquarters in Geneva.<sup>33</sup> Will the voices and demands of “Refugees in Libya” finally be heard? Will the UNHCR step up protection in and resettlement from Libya to match the needs of refugees and migrants trapped in Libya? Or will it at least acknowledge the limitations to its capacity to offer meaningful protection and stop allowing the EU to cover its policy of violent containment with a humanitarian varnish?

### **Reclaiming our humanity through common struggles**

In his 1950 Discourse on Colonialism, Aimé Césaire did not oppose colonialism and slavery to Nazi crimes. Arguing that the Nazi regime’s devastating violence in Europe was the “boomerang effect” of the violence of Europe’s colonial expansion, he sought to account for how they were intertwined, a research agenda that has been reactivated in recent years.<sup>34</sup> In his short book, Césaire describes how the colonized and the colonizer are mutually transformed by violence, arguing that “the colonizer, who [...] gets into the habit of seeing the other man as a beast, accustoms himself to treating him like a beast, tends objectively to transform himself into a beast.”<sup>35</sup> It is not difficult to see the resonance of this mutually destructive process across many contemporary geographies of violence, including at Europe’s disseminated borders – within, at and beyond the limits of EU territory. Can we not see the effects of the dehumanization of illegalized migrants on the rest of European societies and polities? As migrants are treated as beasts by border guards, it is these border guards themselves who turn themselves into beast-like beings. In the same breath as far-right politicians and groups attack migrants from the global south, they target as well other segments of society that do not fit their homogenous and patriarchal vision of nationhood. When the rights of some are treated with disregard, the denial of rights, arbitrariness and violence easily spreads. And if, even as distant – but in many ways implicated – observers, we fail to oppose the dehumanisation of migrants,

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.refugeesinlibya.org/manifesto>

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Stierl and Martina Tazzioli, “One hundred days of refugee protest in Libya”, *Open Democracy*, 3 March 2022.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/one-hundred-days-of-refugee-protest-in-libya/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://unfairagency.org/call-to-geneva/>

<sup>34</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris, Présence africaine, 1955 (1st éd. 1950). Translated as “Discourse on Colonialism”. Translated by Joan Pinkham. *Monthly Review Press, New York*. 1972. For a discussion of the colonial turn in Holocaust studies, see Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, *ibid*, p.101. For recent debates turn has sparked, see Enzo Traverso, “No, Post-Nazi Germany Isn’t a Model of Atoning for the Past”, *Jacobin*, 6 June 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/post-nazi-germany-colonialism-holocaust-israel-atonement>

<sup>35</sup> Aimé Césaire, *ibid*, p. 41. I have kept the term “beast” instead of “animal” used in the English translation to remain closer to the original French term “bête”.

we normalise it and get drawn into its spiral. For as Achille Mbembe has argued, there can only be humanity when one lets oneself affected by the face of the other.<sup>36</sup>

How can we interrupt this process of dehumanization of racialised, classed and illegalised migrants that threatens to engulf us all? I certainly have no easy answer to this question. The only response I have found over the years to avoid despair and restore my own faith in humanity is engaging in common struggles against and across the boundaries that have been drawn between us.

“Humanity” may be a deeply problematic concept, and this for a number of reasons. After all, it has a long been used precisely by white, bourgeois men to deny the humanity of most of the people populating the surface of the earth. Today benevolent calls to overcoming difference towards the recognition of a shared humanity (humanity as sameness we might call it) sound hollow and occlude continuing hierarchies, and different degrees of affectedness and responsibility this entails. This is the risk for example with the concept of the Anthropocene – understood as the period in which human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate – which occludes the reality of a segment of humanity – the global north (and the richest within it) - embedded within a particular economic system – capitalism – being the main cause of the ongoing environmental catastrophe, the effects of which are felt disproportionately by people of the global south.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, even inclusive conceptions of humanity may entrench ontological separations that prevent the full recognition of the entanglements between human and non-human which is the condition for fostering new forms of care and repair.

But the human, as Sylvia Wynter has argued, is also a contested *practice*, which can be mobilised by the oppressed to affirm their human status and transforms the meaning and condition of the human in the process.<sup>38</sup> Like human rights, the categories of the human and humanity may constitute less existing realities than tools for struggle and transformation. When claims to humanity are voiced – as when we hear “We are human!” resonate in demonstrations and protests of migrants and refugees – we have at work what Sandro Mezzadra calls an “insurgence of the human”, which occurs “amid and against violence, insult, and destitution”.<sup>39</sup> As important as it may be to critique the exclusionary and violent dimensions of western humanism and contest the boundaries between the human and non-human, it appears to me fundamental to support struggles against the boundaries that continue to be drawn within humanity itself. At best, these imperatives may work in tandem.

How may we engage in these struggles of what we might call *insurgent humanism* together, despite the hierarchies in our positions? How may we work through our differences to foster new connections and commonalities and weave the fabric of a humanity to come? What is the role of shared grief in this process? For Achille Mbembe, to share the beauty of the world, we must also learn to be in solidarity with all its sufferings. It is this way that we may repair the fabric and face of the world.<sup>40</sup> It is such a process I have sought to engage with by staying with the image of Segen, and giving space to the feeling of how his wounds cause mine to sore, despite the incommensurability of our experiences. Each one of us may find different paths to

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<sup>36</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, La Découverte, Paris, 2016, p.162.

<sup>37</sup> Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, William Heinemann, London, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> See Zimitri Erasmus, “Sylvia Wynter’s Theory of the Human: Counter-, not Post-humanist”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2020, 0(0), pp. 1–19.

<sup>39</sup> Sandro Mezzadra, “Abolitionist Vistas of the Human. Border Struggles, Migration, and Freedom of Movement”, *Citizenship Studies*, 2020, 24:4, pp. 424-440.

<sup>40</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Brutalisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020, p. 56.



relate to the pain of others, and partly make it their own. But I am weary of limiting the basis for the forging of solidarity to shared grief. The feminist movement offers us a deep archive of theories and practices to acknowledge the intersection of different systems of oppression – of patriarchy, of race and class – but also to engage in the careful work of building alliances across different positions within them. Beyond the bonds born out of shared experiences of suffering, Bell Hooks teaches us, we can build bonds of shared struggle towards a common political horizon – or what she calls *political solidarity*.<sup>41</sup>

It is that feeling of commonality in difference and striving towards a shared horizon of freedom and justice that animates my participation in different struggles against the violence of borders, and for the equal right of all to move and stay – from documentation, litigation and advocacy to direct support to illegalised migrants in the exercise of their precarious mobility. It is that feeling that filled me in 2017 as I walked the streets of Geneva marching and shouting at the side of black people leading the protest against slavery in Libya. It is that feeling I have experienced again on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 standing in the cold in front of the UNHCR in Geneva, listening to the voices of refugees who have experienced the Libyan abyss and raising mine with them.

One of Segen's poems starts with these words: "Don't panic, my brother/ tell me, am I not your brother/ why don't you ask about me?/ Is it really that nice living alone if you forget your brother in the moment of need?".<sup>42</sup> I, and many others, won't forget you Segen. I am sorry I was not able to be there for you, and many more brothers and sisters in need. The memory of your loss spurs me to continue as best I can to the struggle against the horrors you experienced in Libya. But no less essential to my determination is knowing that David and others live on to continue their struggle, and that I can stand by their side and raise my voice with theirs for the full recognition of the human dignity, rights, freedom, and equality of all.

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<sup>41</sup> Bell Hooks. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women." *Feminist Review*, no. 23, 1986, pp. 125–38.

<sup>42</sup> Alessandro Puglia, "The Libyan inferno in Segen's poems", *Vita*, 14 September 2018, <http://www.vitainternational.media/en/story/2018/09/14/the-libyan-inferno-in-segens-poems/11/>