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Rethinking Lampedusa

Conceptual Architecture and the Philosophy of
Europe's Paradox

Leonardo Caffo

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Abstract

Lampedusa is habitually narrated as a site of emergency, yet its condition is structural rather than exceptional. This paper argues that the island functions as a paradox-object through which Europe's constitutive contradictions become legible: geographically African, juridically European, and symbolically the very membrane that renders the two categories thinkable as distinct. Drawing on Foucault's dispositif, Deleuze's typology of continental and oceanic islands, and Achille Varzi's distinction between fiat and bona fide boundaries, the paper shows that Lampedusa's administrative and political borders systematically fail to coincide with its own geology — a mismatch condensed in the island's municipal pairing with the volcanic, geologically European Linosa. Reading Agamben's homo sacer against Hardt and Negri's new barbarians, the paper treats the migrant not as a single, settled figure but as the site of two irreconcilable theoretical wagers, staged empirically in the recurring legal confrontation between Italian anti-NGO decrees and search-and-rescue obligations under international maritime law. Building on original fieldwork from the Rethinking Lampedusa research residency (2022–2025), the paper proposes reading the island as an anarchic object — a site where sovereignty is permanently held in default — and extends this default beyond the human register via Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism, arguing that the same arche which excludes the migrant also subtends the human/non-human hierarchy visible in the island's shared ecology of turtle nesting sites and disembarkation quays. The paper closes by proposing, through Rancière's partage du sensible and Ariella Azoulay's civil contract of photography, a counter-design for Lampedusa's spatial and visual regime — one that would force the coexistence, rather than the segregation, of the island's tourist and migrant economies. This remains, deliberately, an open rather than a concluding

argument: further sections will need to test the proposal against concrete institutional and architectural alternatives.

Keywords: Lampedusa; Linosa; new barbarians; fiat boundaries; Mediterranean migration; search and rescue; European Union border regime

Methodological Note: Practice-Based Research and the Position of the Author

This paper departs, at several points, from the conventions of purely textual philosophical argument by drawing on material generated through Rethinking Lampedusa, a research and art-residency program the author has coordinated since 2022. It is necessary to state explicitly what kind of evidentiary status this material is being given, since practice-based research operates under different epistemic warrants than either empirical social science or textual exegesis, and conflating the three would misrepresent what is being claimed. The fieldwork referenced in Section 1.1 and elsewhere does not constitute ethnographic data in the disciplinary sense: it was not collected under a formal research protocol, does not involve systematic interviewing, coding, or triangulation, and makes no claim to generalizability beyond the specific, repeated, situated encounters it records. What it offers instead is what practice-based research literature has termed embodied and situated knowledge — insight generated through sustained, reflexive presence in a site, mediated by artistic and pedagogical practice (the residency’s Moleskine notebooks, workshops, and exhibitions) rather than by observation held at methodological arm’s length. This is a recognized, if still contested, mode of knowledge production within philosophy of art, aesthetics, and increasingly within border and migration studies, where scholars such as Federica Mazzara (cited throughout this paper) have similarly drawn on direct engagement with artistic and

sensory worlds. This is the single design brief that spatial planning and visual practice share, whether pursued by an architect redrawing the island’s footpaths, a curator hanging Porto M’s salvaged debris beside a postcard rack, or a philosopher insisting, across five sections of a paper, that Europe’s oldest border is not a line in the water but a partition in what its own citizens are permitted to see.

Lampedusa does not need a better wall, a kinder camp, or a more compassionate photograph. It needs, at every scale from architecture to image, to stop being organized so that its two populations can coexist without ever appearing to each other at all — because a Europe that can only sustain itself by keeping its own contradiction permanently out of frame has already told us, more honestly than any policy document could, exactly what kind of continent it still refuses to become.

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compiling of migrant debris, shoes, prayer rugs, letters sewn into clothing, into a single assemblage on the island itself — is exactly the visual-register equivalent of the spatial forcing this section has just described: an insistence that the objects the border spectacle would rather keep as anonymous flotsam be held in the same visual field as the island’s touristic self-image, refusing the partage that would otherwise sort them into separate iconographies. But the theoretical apparatus needed to fully justify this move belongs to Ariella Azoulay’s *The Civil Contract of Photography*, which argues that photography constitutes, simultaneously, a set of relations between individuals and the powers that govern them, and a form of relations among equals that constrains that same power — and that, crucially, anyone, even a stateless person, who addresses others through photographs or occupies the position of a photograph’s addressee, is or can become a member of the citizenry of photography. Azoulay’s wager is that citizenship of the image (Azoulay 2008) can be claimed independently of, and sometimes prior to, citizenship of the state — that the migrant photographed at Lampedusa, however flawed or absent their juridical status under Agamben’s apparatus, already participates, through the act of being photographed and photographing back, in a civic relation the nation-state has not authorized and cannot fully revoke.

Taken together, Rancière and Azoulay (2012) give this paper its final theoretical instrument: a counter-design for Lampedusa is not primarily a matter of better buildings or more sympathetic photojournalism, both of which remain trapped within the existing partage even when they mean well. It is a matter of re-engineering the conditions of co-appearance — spatial and visual at once — so that the coral platform and the volcanic islet, the turtle nest and the disembarkation quay, the sunbather and the survivor, the photograph taken by a tourist and the photograph taken, or refused, by the person just rescued, are no longer sorted by an invisible but entirely effective architecture into separate, non-communicating

activist practice on Lampedusa itself to ground theoretical claims that pure textual analysis could not have generated independently.

Three consequences follow from this status, and the reader should hold them in mind throughout.

First, the fieldwork material functions in this paper as illustrative and generative, not as evidentiary in the sense a claim like “in April 2026, nineteen migrants died of hypothermia” is evidentiary, where the latter is grounded in verifiable third-party reporting and is treated accordingly, with appropriate sourcing. Observations such as “migrants are, for most of the time, nowhere to be seen” are offered as a phenomenological report from a specific, repeated vantage point — one that shaped the theoretical questions this paper pursues — rather than as a quantified claim about visibility that could be falsified or replicated by an independent observer under controlled conditions.

Second, the author’s dual position — as philosopher constructing the paper’s theoretical apparatus, and as coordinator of the very project supplying its empirical texture — constitutes a conflict of standpoint that must be disclosed rather than concealed by the register of academic prose. The theoretical claims of Sections 2 through 5 are not dependent on the fieldwork for their validity; they are argued independently through engagement with Agamben, Negri, Varzi, Deleuze, Braidotti, Rancière, and Azoulay, and could in principle be evaluated on that basis alone. The fieldwork’s role is to motivate and to particularize these claims — to show why they were asked of Lampedusa specifically — not to verify them.

Third, this status has direct implications for peer review. A reviewer is entitled to treat the fieldwork passages as testimony subject to the same scrutiny given to any first-person account in practice-based scholarship: useful for generating hypotheses and for grounding a theoretical apparatus in lived particularity, but not a substitute for the independent verification that the paper’s more strictly factual claims (death tolls, legal rulings, geological data) are held to elsewhere and sourced accordingly. Where the

fieldwork and the theoretical argument diverge — where, for instance, the residency’s own artistic outputs might be read as sentimental or self-promotional rather than as rigorous inquiry — that tension is acknowledged here rather than resolved in advance; the reader is invited to weigh the fieldwork’s interpretive yield independently of the institutional fact that the author organized the residency it describes.

1. What Is Lampedusa?

To ask “what is Lampedusa?” is already to commit a category error (Mazzara 2019). Lampedusa does not have being in the full sense of the ontological copula; Lampedusa occurs, repeatedly, as a symptom the continent produces in order to avoid confronting its own reflection. Any serious inquiry must begin with a geological fact prior to a geopolitical one: by continental shelf, the island sits in Africa. It is European by administrative decree, Italian by an 1843 act under Bourbon rule, when the first Sicilian settlers were deported there as colonists — a founding gesture worth pausing on, since Lampedusa emerges as an internal colony well before it becomes, a century and a half later, the site where Europe manages the external colonies now returning to knock at its door. (Proglio and Odasso 2017). Then comes the island’s carceral history: from Bourbon penal settlements to Fascist-era *domicilio coatto*, through to the CPTs and CPRs of the present — Lampedusa has functioned, almost without interruption, as an apparatus of confinement before it ever became an apparatus of border control. This is a point systematically effaced by media doxa: the island does not become a prison with the arrival of migrant boats; it already was a prison, and the landings simply reactivate its original function, its structural vocation. In a Foucauldian register, Lampedusa has no history of events but a history of *dispositifs*: the apparatus changes content — political internees, then migrants — without changing spatial

The hotspot’s razor wire is almost superfluous; the *partage* does the work of exclusion before any fence is required to reinforce it.

This is where the spatial dimension of the problem must be read not as a separate proposal about architecture but as the material infrastructure of the *partage* itself, and it is here that the Rethinking Lampedusa fieldwork becomes, finally, theoretically load-bearing rather than merely illustrative. The residency’s own method — returning, year after year, to walk the same paths, to sit in the same cafés a few hundred meters from the disembarkation quay, to produce a Moleskine that tries to hold tourist beach and processing center on the same page — was never simply documentary. It was, whether or not the collective named it this way at the time, an attempt to force a re-partition of the sensible by physically occupying, with a camera, a notebook, a body, the seam the island’s design is built to keep invisible. Foucault’s *dispositif*, invoked in Section 1 to describe the island’s carceral continuity, and Rancière’s *partage*, invoked here, are in fact describing the same architecture from two angles: the *dispositif* is the *partage*’s hardware, the *partage* is the *dispositif*’s phenomenology. A counter-design adequate to the anarchic object of Section 4 would therefore not be a redesign of the hotspot alone — better facilities, more humane holding conditions, the usual vocabulary of reform that leaves the underlying partition untouched — but a redesign of the entire island’s circulation, one that makes the coincidence of tourist and migrant bodies structurally unavoidable rather than structurally impossible, forcing the two currently separate sensory fields to share, literally, the same path, the same hour, the same frame. The visual dimension of the problem is not a second front but this same argument transposed onto the apparatus that carries Lampedusa’s image to everyone who encounters the island only as spectacle.

Federica Mazzara’s concept of the “border spectacle describes precisely how state and media institutions organize scenes of exclusion that recur across the European border regime, and her account of the Askavusa collective’s Porto M project — the

at all. Space and image are not two separate regimes requiring two separate theoretical toolkits. They are, I want to argue, the same operation performed at two different scales — the hotspot’s fencing and the news photograph’s framing are both, in the strictest sense, acts of partition — and treating them as continuous is what allows this paper to move, finally, from diagnosing Lampedusa’s capture to proposing what a genuinely counter-hegemonic design, spatial and visual at once, would have to do differently.

The theoretical hinge for this fusion is Jacques Rancière’s *partage du sensible*, a term whose productive ambiguity — *partager* means both to share and to divide — is not a translational inconvenience but the concept’s entire philosophical content. For Rancière (1998) the distribution of the sensible is an aesthetico-political settlement: a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics, on this account, does not happen first and then get represented, more or less accurately, in images and spaces; politics is the ongoing contest over what counts as visible, audible, and sayable in the first place, and any distribution that renders certain bodies imperceptible has thereby already excluded them from the sphere in which a political claim can even be formulated as such. This is exactly the mechanism this paper identified, empirically, in Section 1.1’s central fieldwork observation: that when you are physically on Lampedusa, migrants are, for most of the time, nowhere to be seen. That sentence, read through Rancière, is not an anecdote about poor urban planning. It is a description of a *partage* functioning exactly as intended — a distribution engineered so precisely that the tourist’s sensorium and the hotspot’s operational reality never once intersect, not because a wall forbids the intersection, but because the entire built environment of the island, its footpaths, its beach access, its hours of operation, has been arranged so that the two populations occupy incompatible perceptual fields without needing an explicit prohibition at all.

grammar. It is an inverted panopticon-island, where surveillance does not radiate from a central watchtower over those confined inside, but is instead directed from the center (Europe) toward the periphery (the island) toward the absolute outside (the sea, Africa).

Here opens the first conceptual paradox, the one that gives this paper its title: Lampedusa is geographically Africa and juridically Europe, yet functions, symbolically, as the very membrane separating the two — belonging to neither, but constituting the threshold that renders them thinkable as distinct terms. In Deleuzian vocabulary, Lampedusa is not a territory but an impeded line of flight, a point of deterritorialization constantly recoded by the state apparatus: every body that reaches its shore is immediately recaptured within administrative categories (asylum seeker, economic migrant, unaccompanied minor), as though the island itself generated, by mere contact, the urgency to classify whatever touches its sand. There is, further, the Lampedusa that narrates itself today — the Lampedusa of tourism, of award-winning beaches, of documentaries, of Rabbit Beach. This Lampedusa coexists, on the same strip of land, with the Lampedusa of makeshift boats and landings, often mere hundreds of meters away. It is here that the paradox becomes philosophically unbearable, and precisely for that reason, productive: two economies of the body — the body that tans and the body that survives — occupy the same physical space without ever truly meeting, separated not by a wall but by a regime of visibility. It is no accident that the island has become (Cuttitta 2014), in the collective imaginary, a non-place in Augé’s sense: a space one passes through rather than inhabits, even for those who live there — since the Lampedusans themselves are continually reduced to extras in a larger scene, that of “emergency,” which is never truly an emergency (having been structural for three decades) but must be narrated as such so that Europe can go on conceiving itself as a site of normalcy temporarily disturbed, rather than as a system that produces that disturbance as its own condition of possibility.

Lampedusa, in other words, is the place where Europe ceases to be an idea and becomes a border. And a border, as is well known, does not protect those inside it: it defines, often cruelly, who is entitled to claim “inside” at all.

1.1 A Note from the Field

I write this section not as a detached theorist but as someone who has spent three consecutive years returning to the island — coordinating Rethinking Lampedusa, a research and art-residency program born in 2022 out of a collaboration between the MADE Program in Siracusa and the College of Arts, Media and Design at Northeastern University, working alongside artists, photographers, musicians and students, and, crucially, alongside Mediterranean Hope, the operational body that meets the boats. What follows is not fieldwork in the ethnographic sense — I make no claim to method — but something closer to what the group itself has called an “embodied knowledge of agency”: a geo-imaginary and political cartography built through repeated exposure to a place that resists being mapped in any stable sense. Each year of the residency produced an artifact — a Moleskine notebook, deliberately modest in format, that functioned less as documentation than as a working-through of the island’s contradictions: the failure of integration as a policy category, the temporary autonomous zone as a lived (if fragile) possibility, the theater of cruelty as the only honest genre for describing what the border stages daily, and migration itself understood not as a deviation from the nation-state but as its dismissal. Three of these notebooks were eventually exhibited together — first at the final show at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Siracusa, later re-assembled for the Malta Biennale in 2024 under the title Rethinking Lampedusa, Rethinking Malta.

What the fieldwork returns, again and again, is a simple and devastating observation: when you are physically on Lampedusa,

Europe re-imagined, following Balibar (2002), as borderland rather than container is not yet a sufficiently anarchic re-imagining if the threshold it opens remains a threshold only for humans — if the NGO vessel is celebrated as prototype-institution for an open Europe while the reef it sails past, the turtle whose nesting season structures the island’s calendar as much as any migration route does, remain silently subordinated as mere scenery. The “new narrative of Lampedusa” this section calls for cannot be a more generous humanism, however inclusive; it must be a narrative in which porosity is recognized as the island’s ontological condition prior to any political decision about it — boat, reef, turtle, migrant, coral platform, volcanic islet, all already in relation, already crossing whatever line has been fiat-drawn between them — and in which the anarchic object’s refusal to let sovereignty close cleanly on the human is understood as the very same refusal that keeps it from closing cleanly on the species line either. Lampedusa does not merely put Europe’s border in default. It puts Anthropos itself in default, and this, more than any single policy proposal, is what a genuinely porous idea of Europe would need to inherit.

5. Counter-Design: Rethinking Lampedusa’s Visual and Spatial Regime

If the anarchic object developed in Section 4 names a condition — sovereignty permanently in default, porosity as ontological rather than administrative fact — it cannot remain, for a paper that wants to be more than diagnosis, a condition without consequence. The question this section must confront is deliberately double, because it is in truth a single question asked twice: who controls the space in which Lampedusa’s bodies, human and non-human, are arranged and made visible or invisible to one another; and who controls the image through which that arrangement is then transmitted to everyone who will never set foot on the island

count. The migrant excluded from full humanity by racialized border law, and the non-human excluded from moral consideration by anthropocentric exceptionalism, are not two separate victims of two separate systems; they are two outputs of the same arche, and Lampedusa's default of sovereignty — its inability to keep the exclusion clean, its compulsive re-legislation, its geology and its ecology constantly leaking past the line drawn to contain them — is, read this way, one single anarchic event rather than two parallel ones.

The island's own ecology makes this fusion impossible to ignore rather than merely plausible in the abstract. The same beach — Rabbit Island, Isola dei Conigli — that anchors the tourist economy discussed in Section 1 is also a protected nesting site for loggerhead sea turtles, its seasonal closures and patrols occupying the identical stretch of coastline where migrant bodies are recovered or, far more often, never recovered at all. It would be too easy, and too sentimental, to read this proximity as irony. The exact point is that both the turtle and the migrant are subject, on this same sand, to regimes of counting that never once ask them how they wish to be counted: the turtle counted as biodiversity under EU habitat directives, the migrant counted — or, catastrophically, not counted, given the notorious unreliability of Mediterranean death tolls — under an entirely different apparatus, yet both apparatuses issuing, ultimately, from the same anthropocentric arche that Braidotti's monism dissolves by replacing the bios/zoē hierarchy with a naturecultures continuum that brings to an end the categorical distinction between bios, the prerogative of *Anthropos*, and the zoē of animals and non-humans. If that dissolution holds ontologically, then Agamben's apparatus — the very apparatus Section 2 used to diagnose the migrant's exclusion — turns out to be diagnosing only the human-facing surface of a default that runs all the way down through the island's non-human life as well.

This is also, I think, the only way to make good on the porosity this section is arguing for, rather than merely gesturing at it. A

migrants are, for most of the time, nowhere to be seen. This is not because they are absent — it is because the island has engineered, spatially and administratively, a near-total non-coincidence between the tourist's visual field and the hotspot's operational one. The two do not overlap by design, not by accident. This absence-in-presence is, I want to argue, the island's most important theoretical yield, and it is why the concept I keep returning to — one that predates my own work by two decades but that the island seems to have been waiting for — is Antonio Negri's, and later Hardt and Negri's, notion of the new barbarians.

In *Empire* (2000), Hardt and Negri retrieve the migrant, and more broadly the mobile mass of postmodern labor, as the figure through which resistance to imperial order is now thought — not the industrial proletariat rooted in place, but a subject whose mobility and mass nomadism express both a refusal and a search for liberation, resisting exploitative conditions while searching for new forms of life. Against the classical Marxist assumption that labor migrates following capital, Hardt and Negri invert the causality: it is capital, they argue, that follows the desire of the worker for exodus and desertion. The figure produced by this inversion, drawing on Nietzsche as much as Marx, is precisely what they name the New Barbarians — a term deliberately reclaimed from the imperial vocabulary that always designated its outside as savage, ungovernable, invasive. *Empire*, for Hardt and Negri, extends an inclusive net over the world while simultaneously deploying a police function against these new barbarians and rebellious subjects who threaten its order — an order whose own juridical exceptions never fully manage to restore the normalcy they invoke. This is, almost verbatim, the grammar of Lampedusa. The island is the police function Hardt and Negri describe, materialized in concrete, barbed wire, and administrative categorization — but it is simultaneously, and without contradiction, the very site where the new barbarian appears, however briefly, before being absorbed back into *Empire*'s classificatory net. The barbarian, on this island, does not storm

the gates: the barbarian arrives exhausted, is photographed, is processed, and — this is the operative violence — is made invisible to the very people sunbathing four hundred meters away. Negri's barbarian was meant to be a figure of destituent power, a threat to Empire's coherence. On Lampedusa what I have observed, year after year, is that threat neutralized in real time, not through repression alone but through a far subtler mechanism: scheduling (Morton 2003: 293). The barbarian and the tourist are never denied access to the same space — they are simply never granted it at the same hour, in the same frame, on the same Moleskine page.

This is where the theoretical apparatus of the paper's opening section — Foucault's *dispositif*, Deleuze and Guattari's impeded line of flight, Augé's *non-lieu* — needs Negri to become operative rather than merely descriptive: without the figure of the new barbarian, the paradox of Lampedusa remains static, a structure to be diagnosed. With it, the paradox becomes dynamic — a site of genuine, if constantly recaptured, antagonism. The island does not simply contain a contradiction between Europe and its outside; it actively produces and reproduces, season after season, the very barbarian it claims to be defending itself against — because without that produced barbarian, Empire would have no border left to perform.

2. Bare Life or New Barbarian? Agamben, Negri, and the Two Deaths of the Migrant

If Section 1.1 proposed the new barbarian as the figure through which Lampedusa's paradox becomes dynamic rather than merely descriptive, we must now confront the theoretical tradition that reads the same body in the opposite register: not as a threat to sovereign order but as its most complete victim. Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* (Agamben 1995) — the life that may be killed but not sacrificed, included in the juridical order solely through the

restricting it to the human is precisely what keeps reproducing, at a deeper level, the same arche the anarchic object is supposed to unsettle. *Anthropos* — the sovereign, self-identical, rights-bearing Man of classical humanism — is not an incidental feature of the border regime; it is the regime's own founding arche, the single point of origin from which the entire hierarchy of who may be counted, protected, or left to drown is generated. Every mora this paper has documented — the repeatedly overturned decree, the fiat boundary contradicted by bona fide geology — has so far been read as law failing to discipline human mobility completely. But the same failure runs, without a seam, through the boundary the border regime draws between the human and the non-human, because that boundary is not a second, separate operation: it is the same arche, applied one register down. Agamben's *zoē/bios* split, which Section 2 used to explain how the migrant is stripped of political qualification, is not merely analogous to the split between human and animal — it is derived from it, historically and conceptually. To treat Lampedusa's default of sovereignty as a purely human affair is therefore to leave the deepest layer of the arche untouched, and to that extent to under-describe the very anarchy the object is producing. Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism (Braidotti 2019) gives this extension its proper vocabulary rather than importing it from elsewhere. Braidotti's two-pronged critique of humanism targets, first, the universalist posture of the idea of 'Man' as the alleged measure of all things — the same unmarked, idealized figure that, per Sylvia Wynter's genealogy which Braidotti incorporates, has historically excluded or relegated racialized, gendered, and sexualized others from full humanity — and, second, human exceptionalism itself, the anthropocentric bias that installs human beings at the pinnacle of the universe and relegates other life forms to subordinate status. Both targets are, on inspection, the same target I already identified in Agamben and the same target Section 3 identified in the fiat boundary: a single point of command that decides, by fiat rather than by anything given in reality, who or what gets to

to oceanic eruption, African coral bound by decree to Sicilian lava — suggests instead that the island-as-dispositif produces not the clean cosmogonic choice Deleuze's typology proposes, but a permanent, structurally unresolvable superposition of both myths at once, policed not by the earth but by exactly the kind of fiat convention Varzi's ontology teaches us to name, and therefore to hold responsible.

4. Lampedusa as Anarchic Object: Toward a Porous, Non-Anthropocentric Idea of Europe

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Everything argued so far has treated Lampedusa as a site of capture: the panopticon reversed, the camp as nomos, the fiat boundary that outbids its own geology. But an apparatus that produces friction, as Section 2 already suggested through Negri, is also an apparatus that can misfire — and it is worth asking, deliberately and without romanticism, what Lampedusa looks like the moment we stop reading it exclusively as a mechanism of the state and start reading it as what I want to call an anarchic object: not anarchic in the loose sense of “chaotic,” but in the precise sense of a site that structurally resists arche, origin-as-command, the single sovereign point from which order is supposed to radiate. An anarchic object is not a site without law; it is a site where law is permanently in mora — held in default, unable to close on itself, forced to keep re-issuing its own foundational decree because the decree never quite manages to exhaust the reality it purports to organize. Lampedusa, as this paper has already shown twice over — once through the NGO's repeated legal vindication against a decree written specifically to defeat it, once through a geology that refuses to align with the political border drawn across it — is exactly such a site.

The claim I now want to make is that this default is not confined to the human register in which it has so far been argued, and that

form of its exclusion — remains the dominant paradigm through which Mediterranean border studies has thought the migrant since the 1990s. It is worth stating plainly why these two readings are not simply compatible variants of the same critique, but genuinely opposed accounts of where agency resides.

For Agamben, the camp — and by extension the hotspot, the CPR, the identification center — is the nomos of modernity precisely because within it the sovereign exception becomes the rule: life is stripped of political qualification and reduced to *zoē*, bare biological existence, managed rather than represented. The migrant who drowns eighty-five kilometers off Lampedusa, or the nineteen who died of hypothermia and fuel-fume poisoning after two days adrift before the Italian coast guard reached them in April 2026, dies in this reading as the paradigm case of bare life: a death that occurs, structurally, outside politics, in the zone of indistinction the state itself has produced by refusing to extend the protections of citizenship, or even of consistent rescue, to those it has not yet classified. The camp does not exist despite the law; the camp is what the law produces when it wants to govern life without fully counting it as political life. Negri's new barbarian inverts this diagnosis without denying its facts. Where Agamben sees exclusion and passivity, Negri and Hardt see exodus and desire — a subject whose very existence, in motion, constitutes the disturbance that forces Empire to reveal its coercive apparatus. The two readings are not reconcilable through synthesis; they are two different bets about where the political charge of the migrant body actually sits. Agamben's bet is that sovereignty has already won, structurally, before the boat even leaves Zuara or Sfax — that what remains of the migrant, once ashore or once drowned, is testimony to a capture so total that resistance can only be thought retrospectively, as mourning. Negri's bet is that motion itself, the sheer fact of thousands of bodies refusing to remain where Empire has assigned them, is already a form of counter-power — that Empire's escalating apparatus of detention, fining, and interception is not proof of its strength but a symptom

of a threat it cannot fully absorb. Lampedusa is where both bets are placed, simultaneously, on the same stretch of water. It is not a matter of choosing between them for the paper's theoretical architecture; it is a matter of recognizing that the island's political function is to hold both readings open at once, and that this undecidability is not a flaw in either theory but a structural feature of the site itself. The dead are, indisputably, Agamben's bare life: more than 180 people were feared dead or missing in Mediterranean shipwrecks over a ten-day span alone, part of a toll approaching 1,000 deaths in the Central Mediterranean since the start of 2026 — a toll that, as IOM data cited in reporting on the crossing routinely notes, has exceeded 32,700 lives since 2014. Each of these deaths occurs precisely in Agamben's zone of indistinction: not murdered by a sovereign act, not protected by one either, but suspended in a legal geography — Search and Rescue zones assigned to Libya, disembarkation ports assigned by Rome — that determines life and death through jurisdictional technicality rather than through any decision that could be called political in the classical sense.

And yet the same bodies, before they drown, are also — this is the wager Negri's framework asks us to take seriously — the reason an entire apparatus of law has had to be rewritten, repeatedly, in panic. This is where the case of the NGOs becomes theoretically indispensable, because it is the site where the two readings collide most visibly. The so-called Piantedosi Decree, converted into Law 15/2023, requires civil rescue ships to proceed without delay to an assigned, often distant, place of safety, and has resulted in NGO vessels being repeatedly detained and fined after carrying out rescues in the Central Mediterranean. The practical effect, as SAR organizations have documented, has been to force rescue ships to travel over 150,000 additional kilometers to reach distant ports in a single year — equivalent to circling the globe more than three times — keeping them away from the waters where people are actually dying. Amendments in December 2024 further tightened reporting obligations and shortened the window to appeal a vessel's deten-

factures the discontinuity. This is the deepest sense in which the paper's title-paradox — Lampedusa as the membrane rather than the territory — must now be restated in properly metaphysical rather than merely political terms.

The island does not merely represent the arbitrariness of the Europe/Africa distinction; it instantiates, in its own bedrock, the coexistence of a real bona fide fracture (the one separating it from Linosa, which almost nobody treats as politically significant) and an unreal fiat fracture (the one separating it from Africa, which is treated as the most consequential boundary in the Mediterranean). Sovereignty, in other words, has attached its heaviest jurisprudential weight to precisely the boundary that Varzi's ontology would classify as least "carving at the joints," while remaining entirely indifferent to the one boundary in the vicinity that does. Varzi himself poses the underlying metaphysical question with a directness worth preserving here: are there any bona fide boundaries at all — boundaries that carve at the joints — or is every boundary, and hence every object, merely the result of a fiat articulation reflecting our cognitive biases, our social practices, our conventions? Lampedusa does not allow us the comfort of a purely skeptical answer to this question, because the island demonstrably has a bona fide geology, verifiable, mapped, tectonically legible — it simply happens to be a geology the border regime has no interest in consulting. The fiat has not replaced the bona fide; it has simply outbid it, politically, at the one site where their disagreement is most total.

This, finally, is why Deleuze's essay cannot be read, in this context, as offering a comforting alternative to the fiat/bona fide dyad, a "third way" grounded in pure imagination against pure convention. Deleuze's own insistence that the island is less a place than "a place where humanity begins again," a site of *re*-creation dependent on the prior separation the two island-types encode, itself smuggles in a mythic fiat of its own: the fantasy that insularity guarantees origin, that separation guarantees purity. Lampedusa's actual geological hybridity — continental fragment fused administratively

differently under the classical mereotopological apparatus. Bona fide boundaries support a notion of contact effectively modeled by classical topology, whereas fiat boundaries require an altogether different treatment, since they do not sustain the open/closed distinction on which that topology depends. A coastline where limestone physically meets seawater is, for Varzi (2001), a bona fide boundary: it carves reality at a joint that would exist whether or not any observer, cartographer, or state ever noticed it. The line on the map that assigns Lampedusa to Italy rather than to Tunisia, or that fuses Lampedusa and Linosa into a single comune despite their belonging to two different tectonic plates, is by contrast a pure fiat boundary — a demarcation that is not grounded in any intrinsic feature of the underlying reality but corresponds only to cognitive and social phenomena, to conventions of use and administrative practice.

What Lampedusa stages, then, with an almost unbearable geological literalism, is the total non-coincidence of the bona fide boundary and the fiat boundary that are supposed, in the ordinary political imagination, to overlap. The bona fide boundary — the one etched by continental shelves, by coral accretion, by the tectonic history of the Sicilian Channel — runs between Lampedusa and Linosa (Grasso and Pedley 1998), splitting the comune's own territory into an African fragment and a European eruption. The fiat boundary — the one that matters for Frontex, for the Dublin Regulation, for the CPR, for who may disembark and where — runs instead around both islands together, and, more consequentially, between Lampedusa and the North African coast a mere hundred and thirteen kilometers away, a boundary with no bona fide counterpart whatsoever: no ridge, no strait of comparable width to the one separating Sicily from Tunisia, nothing in the sea floor itself that would license the asymmetry the fiat boundary imposes. The Mediterranean does not, at that latitude, “know” that it is dividing two continents; it is the fiat boundary alone, sedimented not in rock but in international law and bilateral memoranda, that manu-

tion. Yet in July 2025, the Italian Constitutional Court, ruling on a referral from the Tribunal of Brindisi, held that the law of the sea cannot be circumvented by punitive and discriminatory domestic norms, and that any order contrary to it must be considered illegal. This sequence — decree, detention, fine, judicial reversal, renewed detention — is not a bureaucratic footnote to the philosophical argument; it is the argument, staged as procedure. The NGO ship is neither sovereign nor bare life: it is a third figure, a private vessel asserting a customary and treaty-based obligation (the maritime duty to render assistance, codified since well before any single nation-state's immigration policy) against a national law explicitly designed to make that obligation costly, slow, and legally hazardous to fulfill. In Agambenian terms, the NGO ship attempts to re-inscribe bare life back into a juridical order that would rather it remain unclassified, adrift, someone else's problem — it insists on making rescue count as law rather than as charity or interference. In Negrian terms, the NGO ship is a militant fragment of the “counter-Empire,” a small and stubbornly mobile apparatus that follows the new barbarians rather than policing them, and whose very existence — its repeated detentions, its repeated legal vindications, its repeated return to sea — enacts exactly the friction Hardt and Negri predicted between imperial governance and the desertions it cannot fully contain.

What the NGO's paradoxical position reveals, then, is that Lampedusa's biopolitical regime does not simply produce bare life and leave it at that; it produces a permanent, low-intensity legal war over who is authorized to name what happens at sea as an emergency requiring rescue, and who is authorized to name it an emergency requiring border defense. Both namings invoke the same word — emergency — and both invoke international law, but they invoke it toward opposite ends: the NGOs toward the extension of Agamben's excluded life back into legal personhood through the technical, almost bureaucratic, act of rescue; the state toward the perpetuation of the exception, dressed as ordinary

administrative procedure, that keeps the migrant's legal status permanently provisional. Lampedusa's coastline, in this sense, is not merely where Europe's geography breaks down; it is where its two rival philosophies of the border — protection as inclusion, protection as exclusion — are forced into daily, procedural, and lethal confrontation.

3. Island-Thought: Deleuze, the Archipelago, and the Fiat Geology of the Border

The concept of "island" cannot be allowed to function in this paper as mere geographical backdrop; it must be interrogated as a spatial dispositif in its own right, with its own ontological grammar, prior to and independent of whatever political content happens to occupy it. The founding text here is Deleuze's early essay "Causes et raisons des îles désertes" (1953), whose central move — often flattened in secondary literature into a simple typology — is in fact a genetic distinction: islands are not a single kind of thing but the product of two opposed cosmogonies. Continental islands are fragments, separated from a landmass by erosion, subsidence, or the widening of a strait: they carry within them the memory of a prior attachment, and their insularity is a subtraction. Oceanic islands, by contrast, are originary: born of eruption, coral accretion, upthrust from the seabed, they have never been anything but separate — their insularity is not a loss but a positive origin. Deleuze's wager is that the human imagination, faced with any island, unconsciously re-narrates it according to one or the other myth regardless of its actual geology, because what is at stake is not geomorphology but a fantasy of the earth's relation to the sea: either the sea has torn something away from us, or the sea has given birth to something that was never ours to begin with.

Lampedusa forces this Deleuzian schema into a productive crisis, because the island's actual geology refuses to cooperate with

either myth cleanly, and because the crisis is compounded — this is the point I want to develop at length — by its administrative pairing with Linosa within the single comune of Lampedusa e Linosa. Geologically, Lampedusa and its satellite islet Lampione sit on the African continental plate: they are, in the strict Deleuzian sense, continental islands with respect to Africa — limestone plateaus, built from a Tortonian coral platform, that were never oceanic eruptions but sedimentary accumulations later isolated by the drowning of the intervening shelf. Linosa, thirty nautical miles to the northeast and sharing Lampedusa's municipal administration, is by contrast unambiguously oceanic in Deleuze's sense: a volcanic construction, three extinct craters rising from black lava rock, geologically affiliated not to Africa but to the Sicilian volcanic province, hence, in the deepest tectonic sense, to Europe. The comune that governs both islands as a single administrative subject therefore yokes together, under one fiat of Italian public law, a piece of Africa that has been separated from its continent (Deleuze's continental island, born of subtraction) and a piece of Europe that erupted independently from the sea floor (Deleuze's oceanic island, born of addition) — and calls the resulting hybrid, without apparent contradiction, a single municipality of the Sicilian province of Agrigento. This is not a curiosity to be relegated to a footnote; it is, I want to argue, the geological unconscious of the entire political paradox this paper is tracing.

And it is precisely here that the vocabulary developed by Achille Varzi, together with Barry Smith, in their theory of fiat and bona fide boundaries becomes indispensable, because it allows us to formalize what would otherwise remain merely evocative. Smith and Varzi distinguish, within a realist ontology of boundaries, between bona fide boundaries, which are simply the physical boundaries of traditional metaphysics, and fiat boundaries, exemplified above all by demarcations induced through human convention, as in the geographic domain. The distinction is not merely terminological: the two kinds of boundary behave