

Opening up the island: a ‘counter-islandness’ approach to migration in Malta.

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ABSTRACT: This paper is based on qualitative research undertaken since 2010 with African immigrants living in the small island state of Malta. Its purpose is to deconstruct a number of discourses and preconceptions about irregular migration, migrants and islandness. We argue that, in order to better understand the situation of migrants in Malta, we have to engage critically with conventional wisdom that depicts (usually small) islands as isolated, immobile and homogeneous spaces. Using a spatial approach, we propose the term ‘counter-islandness’ to describe a migration situation characterized by movement (versus immobility) and articulation of scales (versus isolation). We show how different scales in their complex and multiple interactions contribute to shaping and determining the future and trajectories of the ‘undesirables’. We explain how Malta has found itself at the heart of a complex circulatory system, articulating mobilities operating at various scales. We then categorise the role of the island within migratory patterns into three different forms: the island as barrier, hub, and place of settlement.

Keywords: Malta, irregular migration, counter-islandness, scale, transnational connections

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Introduction: theorizing migration and counter-islandness in Malta

Since the early 2000s, the island state of Malta has encountered entirely new forms of migration, with newcomers arriving from Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. Part of this immigration has come by sea from North Africa. Locally described as *klandestini* (clandestines), this inflow of migrants began in 2002 with the arrival of 1,686 migrants. Between 2002 and 2012, there have been around 14,000 arrivals to the Maltese coasts, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. Based on a Maltese case study, this paper aims to deconstruct a number of discourses and preconceptions about irregular migration and migrants through the lens of islandness. The emergence of so called “irregular” migration to Malta invites us to revisit conventional analyses of islandness which frequently evoke (in Western imagery) notions that can be grouped into three ‘i’s (Bernardie-Tahir, 2008): immobility (places with languid biota, where time moves slower than elsewhere, where change occurs very gradually);

isolation (paradigmatic places of isolation, remoteness and solitude); and identity (folded and closed universes, islands as emblematic places that retain traditions, local cultures; in short, a collective island identity). Such categories seem, however, highly questionable in that island life, as we observe it today, hardly corresponds to these three ‘i’-variations.

Contrary to their image as enchanting places, many European islands face harsh economic, social, public health, and political realities. Far from any state of immutability or immobility, they are territories of movement, animated by enhanced mobility on different scales. In addition, island isolation is hardly applicable to spaces that are today particularly well-connected to the world system. Finally, the essentialism of island identities does not stand up current political and geopolitical realities where deep socio-political cleavages can exist amongst islanders as much as between them and mainlanders (e.g. Baldacchino, 2005, p. 35). Contrary to deterministic discourses that have regularly depicted and underlined the specificity of islandness, we propose a new perspective on the geography of islands based on the neological concept of *counter-islandness*. Counter-islandness offers a framework for challenging implicit delineations of islandness that have long been considered irrefutable. In line with the example of counter-culture – which is not an opposing culture but an expression of contestation within the dominant culture – we are not framing counter-islandness as a combination of inverse notions, in opposition to those which have thus far been attributed to islandness. It would, in fact, be just as dogmatic to argue that islands are systematically defined through movement, openness, and a deficit of identity. Rather, we use counter-islandness as a posture that enables us to rethink and challenge the set of characteristics habitually and cursorily ascribed to islands and island societies.

From this perspective, and more specifically, from that of a critical study of conventional views of irregular migrations to European islands, the heuristic potential of the counter-islandness concept can be mobilized through two distinct approaches: on one hand, an articulation of scales (*versus* isolation), and on the other, movement (*versus* immobility). The first approach concerns the need to contextualise migrations to Malta within the framework of a large and subtle play of geographical scales. In the first section of the paper, we argue that the practices and strategies of migrants are observed differently according to the scale of analysis, in terms of settling down or wandering practices, enclosure or opening, and constraints and resilience. In particular, we focus on the scale of locality, demonstrating the importance of infra-insular scales in observing migratory forms and patterns. In the second section of this paper, we argue that the island is embedded within a complex set of trans-scalar interactions. The migrant’s body itself is influenced by a number of actors and processes, again at different scales – from the local to the global – according to logics of scalar congruence or contradiction. The third section of the paper explores how ‘the island’ forms an interconnected site that is constantly being reshaped according to multiple and complex movements. An island is but a milestone in a complex circulatory framework. Rather than a place that determines the limit between an upstream and a downstream, or the beginning and the end of a migratory path, an island is but a point in a transnational space with moving contours, woven by flexible itineraries and fluid exchanges, reshaped by human and non-human circulations. Looking at Malta’s embeddedness within different scales and rescaling processes, as well as its position within complex circulation frameworks, enables us to challenge common and populist assumptions about island life and to explore the concept of counter-islandness.

The attention we pay to notions of scales, circulation and interconnectedness forms part of a growing interest in the spatial dimensions of social processes that has increasingly characterized the social sciences since the early 2000s. Through an approach which focuses on networking rather than isolation, and circulation rather than immobility, we seek to foreground the actual experiences of migrants, as revealed through their narratives¹ and our observations of their everyday life. Consideration of the migrant as an actor of his/her own trajectory – regardless of his/her degree of marginalization in European societies and on islands – allows us to distance ourselves from victimising discourses which characterise some of the scholarly literature on refugees and asylum seekers as well as broader public opinion.

A multi-scalar approach to migration to Malta

The concept of counter-islandness, as we use it to understand migration to Malta, is linked to the issue of scale in many ways. In this section we argue for the need to multiply levels of observation – from the very small scale of the human body to the large scale of macro-regional processes – so as to better comprehend the changing nature of the migratory process according to the magnification used (Silvey, 2004). A multi-scalar approach enables us to observe the complex interactions between multi-layered “political geographies of control” and forms of resistance implemented by migrants and operating at various scales, from infra- to supra-insular. Such an approach is able to overcome methodological nationalism, a concept defined by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) as the excessive focus of migration scholars on a single (national) level of analysis and problematization. In particular, in this section, we hope to contribute to the growing interest in locality as a relevant scale for understanding migration (Çağlar & Glick-Schiller, 2011; Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2011).

We do so using the example of Hal Far, a former British military base in Malta that was dismantled and converted into a receiving area for irregular migrants in the mid-2000s. Hal Far, which, when we visited it, had the capacity to host the equivalent population of a small town (around 3,000 persons), was itself segregated into several blocks, each specialized in the treatment and management of specific categories of migrants. The proximity of functions of investigation, control, punishment and filter has been clearly evoked by Michel Agier (2011) in describing contemporary forms of encampment. In Hal Far, these functions are to some extent distributed across different places: when arriving by road at Hal Far from the capital city of Valletta, the first building we encounter is Lyster Barracks, a detention centre with the capacity to host up to 700 immigrants². Lyster Barracks is one of the most important detention centres of the island: together with Safi Barracks, they are able to host about 1,000 migrants. Contrary

¹ We have carried out research on migration in Malta since the Spring of 2010. Observations and semi-structured interviews with migrants were undertaken as well as interviews with the main actors of the Maltese migratory scene (social workers, members of the Maltese government, ONG leaders, and open centre managers). For the most part, we have worked separately but we also undertook a collaborative research trip to Hal Far and Balzan in May 2011. Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir took two research trips, one in February 2010 together with Anne Blanchier, and one in April 2010 with the photographer Elisabeth Cosimi in the framework of the Miriade programme (Irregular Migration to European Islands). Her observations focused on the Hal Far and Marsa open centres. Camille Schmoll carried out research on the situation of Somali Women in Hal Far open centres in May 2010, together with Anna Spiteri. She returned to Malta in October 2010 to conduct observations and interviews in Hal Far and Balzan. The interviews carried out in May 2010 were supported by the FP7 Eurobroadmap European Commission research program (PC/2007-2013). See <http://www.eurobroadmap.eu>

² Following national and EU legislation, migrants can be kept in detention for up to 18 months upon arriving in Malta (see Lemaire, 2014).

to other detention centres, Lyster Barracks can host both men and women. The other centres in Hal Far are open centres to which migrants are usually reallocated after detention, according to their gender, juridical status and family situation. Open centres are distributed across the “tent village” (over 35 tents hosting about 1,000 migrants; but with the tents recently replaced by containers), the so-called “hangar” (a huge army warehouse which has been filled with beds and surrounded by containers, hosting 600 migrants most of whom are men), the family centre (hosting about 160 persons) and the single women centre (hosting about 120 women). Each of them is spatially divided into blocks hosting migrants of the same ethnic origins. A dimension of enclosure and confinement is evident in these centres: most are surrounded by walls and barbed wire. Even in open centres, where migrants can theoretically move freely in and out, human activity is under tight surveillance, visits are strictly limited, and going out at night-time is generally forbidden (also Lemaire, 2014).

As such, Hal Far presents a textbook-case, at the local scale, of a ‘political geography of control’, with its borders and barriers, and its methods of dividing space along racial lines, family status, gender and generation of arrival on the island, since latecomers are most often assigned to the most awkward spaces. Nonetheless, Hal Far is also a remarkable site in which to observe different forms of resilience and coping strategies, which in turn translate into processes of appropriation and territorialization. Despite its carceral atmosphere, Hal Far has also become, over the long-term, a lived space where social life takes shape and evolves. This can be observed through the organization of ceremonies, meetings, businesses and various social events. Such social practices bring attention to even finer scalar units than that of locality: the migrant body. Migrant bodies are entrenched and monitored, but are also able to recover and liberate themselves in specific places and moments and through particular activities and practices, such as sports and worship. The installation of weightlifting equipment at the back of the Hal Far Hangar (rowing machines and dumbbells) and the multiplication of soccer games within the walls of the centres illustrate the role that corporal strategies play in allowing migrants to take back control of their bodies and lives. Similarly, migrant demands to have a proper place of worship within the walls of the open centres correspond to the need for a sacralized, silent, isolated space for spiritual recovery.

The example of Hal Far reveals the relevance of micro-scales of analysis for understanding migration to Malta. It is also, however, necessary to take into account other scalar units, such as the national/island scale or the regional/Euro-Mediterranean scale, so as to avoid misleadingly focusing solely on the local. The island scale, for example, provides a very different standpoint for observing migratory patterns. At this scale, we observe the localization of migrant housing and see that their spatial relegation cuts them off from access to social services and the labour market. We can also observe the existence of specific niches in which cohabitation happens in more subtle ways. These “common spaces” are protean, varying from places where the local population and migrants find themselves simply within the same space without really engaging in intercultural exchanges to “hybridization spaces” where social interaction is more developed and concrete (Bernardie-Tahir 2007). Such patterns of hybridization take place in the spaces of everyday life where people meet and get to know one another (e.g. in the coffee stalls of City Gate in Valletta; for families, in public gardens, such as San Anton; for specific Christian groups, in church), in entertainment or leisure places (e.g. the nightclubs of Paceville or, for younger men, neighbourhood soccer clubs) or even the workplace (e.g. in hotels or construction sites which employ both a local and a foreign workforce). The cohabitation of migrants and non-migrants may, however, also be a source of

conflict, at times leading to violence, as testified by many episodes of xenophobia or the physical injury of immigrants or Maltese pro-immigrants. Migrants also experience ordinary racism, as exemplified by frequent cases of discrimination on public transportation (Lutterbeck, 2009). Some violent episodes have reached extreme levels, such as that of the death of a Sudanese migrant, beaten by a security guard in front of a bar in Paceville in June 2009 (Times of Malta, 2009).

If we once again change the setting of the zoom and look at Malta within the broader Euro-Mediterranean macro-regional context, we observe yet a different picture. Because of its geographic location, Malta perceives itself as both a sentinel island and a bastion of Europe in the context of a troubled migratory situation (see Falzon, 2012; Mainwaring, 2014; Baldacchino, this issue). EU policy makers are very active in promoting and reinforcing its border function, sending Frontex operators to its surrounding waters and funding and logistically supporting Maltese detention and deportation policy. Small islands indeed are relatively peripheral within the Euro-African migration system, yet simultaneously central to the concrete and symbolic building of borders in the context of a European migratory policy based on oppositions between identity and otherness, insideness and outsideness (Bernardie-Tahir & Schmoll, 2014).

Rescaling the island

As stated in the previous section, a multi-scalar approach is needed in order to gain a full understanding of the Maltese migratory situation. We also argue for the need to consider different scales in their complex, multiple interactions, and the way they contribute to shaping and determining the future and trajectories of “undesirables” (Agier, 2011). The concept of scale has benefitted from renewed interest in recent years, especially within political economy (Brenner 2011) and post-structural approaches (Martson, 2000). Many authors have proposed looking at the interaction of scales of power, both from the perspective of territorial governments and from the perspective of economic processes connected to globalization (e.g. Smith, 1992; MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2004; Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Brenner, 2011). This strand of research demonstrates that scales, far from constituting fixed separate units of analysis, are socially constructed and variable through time and space – we can indeed evoke dynamics of rescaling – as well as co-produced relative to one another. Research on rescaling processes has nevertheless concentrated on rather few scalar entities, such as the state, the urban, the regional and the global; the notion of scale remains relatively underdeveloped outside the field of urban and regional studies. Sallie Marston (2000) has, through her study of the role of trans-scalar processes in local spaces of social reproduction, critiqued the lack of attention paid to fine spatial entities and specific power dynamics, often mistakenly confined to the private sphere. As noted by Çağlar and Glick-Schiller (2011), migration studies could greatly benefit from the interpretation of migratory processes in terms of the interplay of scales (also Loyd & Mountz, this issue). In Malta for instance, migrants’ spatialities are embedded within multiple and articulated, interlocked, and sometimes contradictory scalar processes.

Following Marston’s call for research on fine spatial entities, we consider the migrant body as an appropriate starting point for a reflection on rescaling processes in Malta. The migrant body is one of most important spatial units in that it mediates one’s relationship to others and to the outside world. As such it is located at the intersection of complex regulatory

mechanisms, a result of the interplay between different scales of power and control. First, at the international scale, refugee protection conventions impose caring on migrant bodies, although such caring is sometimes transformed into discipline, especially when used to control the intimacy and reproduction of men and women³. Secondly, at the European level, agreements regarding asylum cooperation (Dublin, Dublin 2, and the 2008 European Pact on Immigration) govern the mobility of asylum seekers in EU territory, by filing and indexing their bodies through the EURODAC system (Bernardie-Tahir & Schmoll, 2014). Finally, the standards governing the right to asylum are interpreted and applied at the local scale; at times challenging or reinforcing European agreements and refugee protection conventions. Such standards are made operative by both local (such as emigrant committees run by the local church, the government, local NGOs) and transnational actors (working locally), such as UNHCR or IOM.

When transcalar mechanisms of power and control interact, they can result in confinement/separation and render the body vulnerable and disempowered, as attested by numerous reports and testimonies. Moreover, the trans-scalar dimension of migration enables local actors, foremost the state to deny any responsibility in violence inflicted on migrant bodies. For example, the insufferable nature of migration detention is frequently summarily attributed, by local state agencies, to the strict nature of European standards or to the absence of intra-European solidarity (e.g. Council of Europe, 2011; MSF, 2009; Vella, 2008; also Massa, 2011). From this perspective, Malta's entry into the European Union in 2004 has had a notable impact on migration policies and their application at the local scale. It has given new shape and content to scalar processes of migration and produced contradictory dynamics. On one hand, entry into the EU has generated homogeneity with the European migratory system. Malta has joined a unified legal and regulatory regime, notably the Schengen area. On the other hand, Malta's EU membership has generated new gaps within an intra-European space that is divided among territories which serve partly as filters/guards/barriers and partly as settlement territories (Clochard/Migreurop, 2012; Mainwaring, 2014). It is in this context that Malta has been integrated, along with other islands and frontal spaces, into a circle of useful peripheries, as demonstrated by the establishment of organizations such as the European Agency for Asylum in Malta (or Frontex in Warsaw). In other words, the Europeanization of migration policies and control has engendered a process of rescaling that always attributes more importance to the European scale of governance, while producing spaces of differing functionalities, contributing to classifying and sorting populations and ostracising certain groups of migrants (Rodier, 2005).

In certain cases and under specific circumstances, however, single nation states contest European institutions and international rules, such that contradictions of scales become more important than their interlocking. In the case of Malta, for instance, disregard of international and European rules takes various forms, notably by sending back boats which arrived by sea, or by distributing travel documents to newly arrived migrants, practised until 2008 (Guérinot,

³ The ambivalence of "encampment policies", between care, distance and control, has been insightfully described by Agier (2011).

2008) in an attempt to facilitate their circulation within the EU⁴. These two examples demonstrate the ways that frictions between the national scale and the European/supra-national scale can generate contradictory effects, by introducing margins of opportunity for migrants or, on the contrary, contributing to the deterioration of their living conditions.

The Island: an interconnected site within a circulatory framework

Over the last twenty years, the increasing complexity of migratory routes and pathways has led researchers to reconsider the conceptual and methodological tools traditionally used to describe migratory flows. Research on transnationalism, mobilities, and translocalities has reflected on how migrants are key actors in the production of large and complex spatial formations that are lived, practised and structured through patterns of human and non-human circulation (see, among many others, Basch, Glick-Schiller & Szanton-Blanc, 1996; Faist, 2000; Faret & Cortes, 2009; Portes, 1996; Pries, 1999; Smith, 1999; Tarrius, 1995; Urry, 2000; Vertovec, 1999). These path-breaking conceptual approaches suggested a need to break away from 'island-centred' conceptions of international migration, which tend to construct islands as simple milestones on linear paths leading migrants from a starting location to a final destination.

Drawing on this literature, a counter-islandness approach enables us to overcome an enduring image of islandness equated with immobility or immutability, but rather consider the latter in terms of movement and circulation. Far from languid patches of land disconnected from the logics of globalization, islands are, on the contrary, connected to the rest of the world through innumerable links, weaved by human and non-human mobilities which design the contours of a vast system of transnational circulation. Furthermore, migrant circulations and projects are constantly reshaped and evolve alongside their trajectories and according to the spaces they cross and the places they inhabit, the people they meet, the evolution of international regulation, and their personal situations. Most migration projects remain 'works in progress': they change and adapt to the constraints or opportunities encountered by migrants along their route. In this perspective, 'going through' and 'being on' an island, whether desired or not, cannot be seen as a momentary stop that does not affect the migrant's project. In other words, the island does not simply form a transit space (Collyer & De Haas, 2012; Collyer, Duvell, & De Haas, 2012), but is a territory that intervenes and interferes in an ongoing reshaping of the migrant trajectory, according to the evolution of local and international economic and political contexts. Less than a link in a chain, the island appears as a land of resources and constraints, which is traversed, lived, and even appropriated.

In this regard, Malta is a textbook case. Since the early 2000s numerous studies have presented the island as a transit area for Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to Europe (including most contributions to this special issue). Malta certainly played this role throughout the 1990s, either for migrants who had just transited in Maltese territorial waters without stopping on the island, or for others who had used Malta as a stepping-stone to Sicily (Courrier International, 2003)⁵. However, since 2002, when European authorities enjoined the Maltese government to actively participate in the fight against so-called 'irregular' migration, Malta's

⁴ This practice recalls the Italian government's decision, in spring of 2011, to provide temporary residence permits to Tunisian migrants so as to facilitate their circulation to other European countries.

⁵ Between 1992 and 1994, Tourab Ahmed Sheik, a Maltese citizen of Pakistani origins, helped some 10,000 undocumented migrants to reach the shores of Sicily (Courrier International, 2003).

role and function within migratory flows has become more complex. Since its accession to the EU in 2004, Malta has found itself at the heart of a complex circulatory system, articulating mobilities operating at various scales. More specifically, the function of the island can be categorized into three different forms: the island as a barrier the island as a point where migrants come and go – what we hereunder refer to as a ‘hub’ – and the island as a home and as a place where to settle down.

The island as a barrier

Most migrants who leave North African shores (mainly Tunisia and Libya in recent years) find themselves in Maltese territorial waters and arrive in Malta perhaps by chance, often due to navigational errors that divert their ship from its original path towards Lampedusa. Once rescued at sea and then landed on the island territory, migrants are imprisoned in detention centres for the time needed to shed light on their identity and situation. Given their weak diplomatic power (proportional to the economic and geopolitical weight of this micro-state), Maltese authorities have been able to establish very few readmission agreements, mainly with North African states. Thus, most migrants of North African citizenship are directly deported to their countries of origin (194 deportations in 2009). Their return can, however, also be “voluntary,” as encouraged by the IOM (International Organization for Migration) which provides help mainly for rejected asylum seekers (especially those from West Africa) who wish to return to their home countries. In 2009 and 2010, respectively 146 and 45 migrants benefited from an IOM program called “Restart,” which aims to facilitate their return projects through administrative (obtaining passports and visas), logistical (supply of tickets), and financial (€2,500 [US\$2,800] for the promotion of any form of economic reintegration) support (Darmanin, 2009). In both cases, Malta operates as a barrier that implies a temporary or definitive return for migrants to their home country.

The island as a hub

Yet, the island also forms a hub where migrants come and go according to variable temporalities and schemes. For those seeking asylum, there are three possible outcomes, any of which will deeply modify their circulatory project: obtaining refugee status, gaining subsidiary protection, or being rejected. The first category represents only 2.5% of the total over the period 2002-2010. The other two outcomes, while quite different, substantially reduce migrants’ possibility of movement. Rejection means the impossibility of having a regular residence permit and travel documents, while subsidiary status means no access to family reunification or citizenship as well as limited possibilities for travelling within the EU. Any of these outcomes lead migrants to reconfigure their migration plans by necessarily taking into account the new constraints imposed upon them.

In this context, the island hub operates in two different ways. Malta may simply be a place of transit, when migrants, irregularly or when given travel documents, permanently leave and settle elsewhere in Europe. Some migrants who are rejected try to “disappear” and reach Europe via close-by Sicily. Others, benefiting from subsidiary protection or refugee status, use their right to travel within the Schengen area in order to leave Malta for good and to settle irregularly elsewhere in Europe, most often in Scandinavian countries. Migrants may also be legally sent from Malta to places that rarely correspond to their initial plans. This is the case of resettlement (to the US) or relocation (within the EU) programs, that have enabled, between 2008 and 2012, more than 260 migrants under protection status to resettle in the United States⁶ and 583 others to leave Malta for other European countries (mainly in Germany, France, Poland and Norway (EASO, 2012; also Lemaire, 2014). These programmes are based on partnership between the Maltese government and the settlement countries, in cooperation with IOM, UNHCR and local NGOs. In relocation/resettlement programmes, migrants do not really choose their destination and are thus often disconnected from their own social networks. They ask to benefit from these programmes with the idea that any place in Europe or in the US would be better than Malta. Disappointment, however, can be strong once they arrive in their new host country. Migrants are often offered precarious and isolated accommodation and integration measures are often limited.

Malta is also a place where migrants come and go within a circulatory framework, delineated by social and family networks. Many migrants are in close contact with family members, friends or neighbours living in other European countries. Some of the migrants we met in Malta had already travelled to France, Germany, Scandinavia or the Netherlands to meet friends and relatives. Some had come back voluntarily to Malta, while others were deported back to the island following the Dublin II agreements. The number of such return migrants, also known as the “Dublin IIs,” has increased over the past few years (about 500 to 700 people were returned to Malta in 2010). Finally, migrants’ projects can be entirely reshaped by their stay in Malta. Such changes may either be decided by the migrants themselves or imposed upon them by local or international constraints.

A place to settle down

The island may also become a place to settle down, contrarily to conventional wisdom (Falzon 2012). This usually happens by default, as a second-best option, due to the impossibility of moving or conceiving a way to settle down in another state, either because the migrant has obtained protection status in Malta or, on the contrary, because they were unable to gain a residence permit. Nevertheless, the number of migrants who stay and establish their permanent residence in Malta is on this rise, despite often being largely overlooked by researchers. Many migrants find opportunities in the tourism and construction sectors. With regard to housing, it is still too early to observe the appearance of truly ethnic neighbourhoods in Malta, although concentrations of certain ethnic groups in neighbourhoods or specific localities are beginning to emerge, such as the many Nigerians who have taken up residence in the touristic area of Bugibba (in the North-east of Malta) or the Tal-Papa estate of Birżebbuġa and its suburb of Bengħisa (in the South-east). Migrants who settle down for the long-term in Malta may develop some familiarity with different places on the island. As we described above, migrants’ daily practices are diverse and range from forms of sociability with the local society to

⁶ See the website of the US embassy in Malta: <http://malta.usembassy.gov/resettlement2.html>.

concrete quotidian experiences of racism and exclusion (Lutterbeck, 2009). Maltese migrants face many legal and institutional obstacles to their integration on the island. It is, for example, impossible for those who do not have protection status to legalise their situation, there is a lack of recognition of certain marriages, and there are many limits on access to healthcare, education and family reunification. Simultaneously, we have witnessed the emergence, over the last few years, of an anti-racist movement, within which the role of migrants is increasingly affirmed. Interestingly enough, migrants that would seem particularly disempowered, because they do not have a residence or work permit, are the most active in claiming respect for human rights and citizenship in Malta and demonstrating their desire for integration. This apparent paradox may be explained by the fact that migrants who benefit from protection status in Malta still hope to relocate or resettle elsewhere and as such considerably limit their claims and interactions with the local society.

The distinctions we made between the island as a barrier, the island as a hub, and the island as a place of settlement allow us to show the role Malta plays within a broader Euro-African framework. A circulatory approach to the island cannot, however, be limited to the observation of human mobility alone. As scholars of mobilities and transnationalism have stressed, other types of circulations contribute to the making of transnational spaces and connections (Adey, 2009; Urry, 2000, also Schmoll, & Semi, 2013). Migrants, whether they settle or simply pass through Malta, are initiators of different types of circulations, thus connecting the island to many other places in Europe and the world. Emotions and affects, conveyed through numerous communication tools – internet, cell phones, e-mail – or even the circulation of objects such as presents sent to parents and children dispersed throughout Europe - enable migrants to maintain, if not reactivate, long-distance social connections. Money transfers also reinforce reciprocal help available within dispersed families and diasporas. Of no less importance, the circulation of information aids in the construction of transnational subjectivities and transnational forms of political mobilization “without citizenship”, as seen in forms of rebellion observed in September 2011 in Lampedusa detention centres, echoing the Safi riots in detention during the same summer (La Stampa, 2011; Times of Malta, 2011). Such forms of mobilization are similarly testified to by the diffusion, amongst Africans of Malta, of the ‘Rosarno model of insurrection’, whose name recalls a Calabrian village, in southern Italy, where Africans decided to revolt against poor living and working conditions. All these circulations contribute to defining spaces of belonging which reach far beyond island borders. Combined, they bring about a reappropriation and redefinition of trajectories and projects on the part of migrants themselves.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have endeavoured to put forward a critique of commonly held views of islandness and ‘irregular’ migration to Malta through the development of a concept of ‘counter-islandness’. Such an approach implies, on one hand, the observation of complex and evolving trans-scalar logics of control, exclusion, but also resistance and hybridization within Maltese society. On the other hand, it is based on the analysis of movement, showing how migrants’ concrete daily experiences consist of multiple circulations, plural social ties, and diverse, multi-scalar, spatial practices.

Trans-scalar and circulatory processes contribute to the redefinition of borders and boundaries between the Maltese and “the others”. As such, they profoundly change and reshape the image and identity of the island. They transform Malta into a space of enclosure, of control and filtering, determining exclusion and marginalization (mostly through deportation and detention) of many categories of migrants. Yet, they also make the island a key site for the development of reticular identities and new forms of political mobilizations ‘without citizenship’. From this perspective, the issue of mobilities reaching Maltese shores cannot be treated as solely a national or insular question. Rather, Malta reveals the complexity of migration issues and offers a remarkable ‘site of condensation’ of the ambivalences of the Euro-Mediterranean region where one can observe new cartographies of power and resistance in the making.

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