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# Thinking on foot: New Italian pilgrimages in the work of Emily Jacir, Diana Matar and Hisham Matar

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## ABSTRACT

The catalogue to Rome-based Palestinian artist Emily Jacir's *Europa* exhibition of 2015 includes a short excerpt from Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought* entitled "Thinking on Foot". This article maps key elements of Cassano's essay, namely the focus on "Mediterranean" values of slowness, contemplation, and conviviality onto readings of Italy-based works by Emily Jacir, Diana Matar and Hisham Matar, all of which provide capacious ways to rethink the idea of pilgrimage. Reflecting on the sites, sights and routes that form the basis of these works, the article shows how they represent pilgrimage as a slow form of contemporary cultural mobility, one concerned with deep contemplation of place as a response to experiences of loss, displacement and exile. Sacred journeying is experienced here through instances of micro-travel, such as walking, standing and looking, and personal transformation is charted through moments of slow thought and memory-work, as captured in multiple, mobile artistic forms.

## KEYWORDS

Mediterranean; pilgrimage; slowness; maps; cultural mobility; contemplation

We must go slow like an old country train carrying peasant women dressed in black, like those who go on foot and see the world magically opening ahead, because going on foot is like leafing through a book, while running is like looking at its cover. (Cassano 2012, 9)

In the catalogue to her *Europa* exhibition, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2015, Rome-based Palestinian artist Emily Jacir includes an excerpt from Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought* (*Il pensiero meridiano*) entitled "Thinking on Foot". It was one of several gestures that emphasised the significance that Italy holds for her both personally and artistically, from the title of the exhibition to works featured within it that are rooted in Italy, such as *Material for a Film* (2005–), *stazione* (2008–9) and *Via Crucis* (2014–15). Cassano's text locates Italy as a specifically *southern* European country, one that is connected to a wider Mediterranean axis of shared values and heritage that includes countries such as Palestine, Lebanon and Libya on the southern and eastern shores of the sea. Jacir engages with Cassano's thought to evidence these Southern links and to open up the Mediterranean space to new criss-crossing artistic interventions that recall long histories of both cultural exchange and of colonial occupation and multiple displacements, whose aftershocks reverberate into

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the present day. Her own works additionally aim to re-place elements of southern and eastern Mediterranean history and heritage *into* Italian spaces, thus also inserting them as long-standing and future-facing fixtures within Italian cultural traditions.

This article will map key elements of Cassano's essay, namely his focus on the "Mediterranean" values of slowness, contemplation and conviviality, onto a comparative reading of works by three artists and writers who share similar engagements with Italian places: Emily Jacir (*stazione; Via Crucis*), the US photographer Diana Matar (*Evidence*, 2014) and her husband, Libyan novelist Hisham Matar (*A Month in Siena*, 2019). Reflecting on the sites, sights and routes that form the basis of these works, I show how they can be seen as pilgrimages, if we understand pilgrimage to be a slow form of contemporary cultural mobility, one concerned with a deep contemplation of place. Seen in this light, these pilgrimages become "opportunities to reflect upon, re-embody, sometimes even retrospectively transform, past journeys": "in the process (turning) history into both myth and ritual" (Coleman and Eade 2004, 18). Sacred journeying is experienced here through instances of micro-travel, such as walking, standing and looking (up or down). Personal transformation is charted through moments of slow thought and memory-work, as captured in multiple, mobile artistic forms. Additionally, this article uses a framework informed by the same values of slowness, contemplation and conviviality in order to provide a meta-reflection on the experience of carrying out research in the distorted time-space of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

## Slowing down

There is more life in walking ten kilometres on foot than in a transoceanic route that drowns you in the loneliness of its planning, a gluttony that cannot be digested. (Cassano 2012, 10)

When I was first thinking about writing this article, in the late summer of 2020, the first national lockdown of the pandemic was behind us in the UK. The enforced immobility that so many had experienced seemed to be easing. People started making plans. I had been invited to spend 2021 as a visiting professor at the University of Pavia, just outside Milan. Perfect!, I thought, I'll be able to spend time in the San Raffaele Arcangelo church where Jacir's *Via Crucis* is on permanent display. I was excited to follow the stations of the cross myself, to replicate the slow, contemplative walk between the fourteen *tondi*, to emplace myself into the experiential journey of pilgrimage that I had been reading so much about. It would be an exciting way to approach the material, to try to explore a sense of my own embodied response to the work, not to have to rely on the small printed catalogue and accounts of other viewers' experiences of it. But as I began writing in early 2021 and in another national lockdown – still in Scotland and with no sense of when my planned visit to Italy would take place – I was forced to rethink how to do this. I decided to use this article as a kind of "pilgrimage" in itself, working through a number of "stations" of my own thought. The experience of reading and writing in a pandemic has caused all kinds of issues for researchers, not least logistical (the lack of access to libraries, archives and field sites, as well as caring responsibilities at home and additional pressures at work), but also anxieties about loved ones falling ill, coupled with the ever-present climate of fear and crisis. It has become usual for children and pets to interrupt online meetings and classes; students and colleagues are

present in our home spaces and the boundaries between domestic and professional life zones have become entirely porous. But what does all this mean for our research? The question I am posing here is whether we can still carry on excluding our own writing and research processes from the finished outcomes. Should I pretend I am writing in usual circumstances? Or does this sense of stasis, of slowing down, actually provide us with a chance to rethink how our methods and practices might become embedded in our finished articles and book chapters?

Again, I think walking, and perhaps “sacred” walking in particular, might offer one model of doing this. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst show how walking is crucial to fieldwork practices: researchers often have to travel to where they want to carry out research, and they then continue to move around once there, visiting different places to meet and interview people, witness particular activities, or see significant sites. But these forms of travel often remain buried in the annotations of fieldnotes, rarely making it into published outcomes. There is a “separation of *what* is being purposefully done (arriving somewhere, say) from *how* it is done (by getting there, step by step, along a path)” (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, xi). In sacred walking there is, as Coleman and Eade remark, a similar contrast between “poses of static devotion and the movement needed to reach places of pilgrimage” (2004, 1). The proposition I am making here is this: let us try to retain something of the tactile, sensory, embodied experience of doing research, the “feet-first engagement with the world” (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, 3) that our preparatory work requires of us within our published outputs. But how to do this in a pandemic when most ‘horizontal’ travel has ceased? Many commentators have famously considered walking to be a narrative form in itself (Mauss [1934] 1973; Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984; Solnit 2001), a form that comprises our own mapping and imprinting of a bodily rhythm or a narrative on the surroundings. But Ingold and Lee Vergunst urge us to reverse this proposition, to see “thinking and feeling as ways of walking” (2008, 2). So here I will plot out stations of a pilgrimage that will be paper-based, think of obstacles to travel as resources for the mind to stretch out its imaginative faculties, and use thought patterns to pace out and map the stops on a research journey. This article shares my own experience of a vertical research journey as anti-linear, non-teleological, and resolutely slow-paced. It resonates with Frédéric Gros’ description of slow walking as “cleaving perfectly to time, so closely that the seconds fall one by one, drop by drop [...] This stretching of time deepens space” (2014, 37). In my framing of this article, I will explore the spatial recesses of Cassano’s Mediterranean as an archive of “redeemable” and “subaltern” values such as slowness, contemplation and conviviality; and of traditions and heritage that privilege exchange, hybridisation and plurality (Bouchard and Ferme 2013, 81). In order to embark on this slow, vertical journey, I turn first to the maps we might find that we need to guide us.

## Maps

Every frontier carries with it, like a shadow, its transgression, something that goes against the prohibitions of nations. (Cassano 2012, 44)

London is where this all starts, the first point on my map. I always enjoy getting off the Tube at Whitechapel. There are bright market stalls waiting outside, the curved golden

dome and minarets of the London Mosque, the promise of fiery Punjabi food from Tayyab's, and visiting dear friends who live in a tiny cul-de-sac tucked behind the tall incinerators of the hospital. I like the way the Tube runs overground in parts here, and how it curls back round on itself towards the Tower of London before descending again to the City and back West, home. I meet my oldest friend here in the October of 2015 and we visit Emily Jacir's exhibition, *Europa*. One of the first, striking works on display was *stazione* (2008–9). The aim of the installation was to provide an Arabic translation for the names of each of the twenty-four stops on the number 1 vaporetto (water bus) route through Venice. Although never exhibited in its original design (more on this later), the striking images of the bilingual signs were printed into a foldable map, providing a virtual, imagined route that can be followed through the city. This folded map, the only remnant of a never-realised project, is my starting point and a guide to navigate the complexities of researching in pandemic time and space. The point is not to unfold Jacir's map, smooth it out on a flat surface, run our fingers over the creases to minimise the disruption they cause to the printed lines and names. Instead, my alternative suggestion is to read this map using Iain Chambers' Deleuze-inspired attention to the folds themselves and see what different perspectives they add to the idea of a Mediterranean pilgrimage. As Chambers says, folds transform the tabular space of the map, allowing it to acquire "depth when it is bent and deviated by excluded rhythms and dislocating narratives" (2008, 18). As such, the folded space is "not only physical but also temporal: it is not a mute object but product and process" (2008, 18). It demands attention to elements of dislocation and exclusion, highlighting the layering of time that occurs in sedimented spaces of meaning. And in so doing, it allows the Mediterranean city of Venice to become the site "for an experiment in a different form of history writing, an experiment in language and representation where it becomes possible to engage with 'the outside of the history of modernity' through points of resistance and refusal that continually relay us elsewhere, and leads to an inevitable 'questioning of history as status quo'" (Chambers 2008, 27). It also asks us to wonder about what has been lost in time, and what was (perhaps) never there in the first place.

This reflection on the bent and deviated time of folded maps recalls our contemporary experiences of what has been termed pandemic time: where the temporal arc of each day can feel loose and roomy, as if it is passing exquisitely (or dreadfully) slowly. Yet retrospectively time appears to be moving more quickly than usual, because of the repetitive nature of our activities, and as we look forward, we reckon with an unusually "open-ended, uncertain future" (Pong 2020). There are few anchors to mark out the passing of past, present and future time, aligning with Hisham Matar's description of his time spent in Siena in 2015, where "time folds together and collapses like a concertina of days made of the same fabric" (2019, 26). This altered perception of time is exacerbated by the sense of both belatedness and temporal syncopation that we experience being plotted out over the infection curves replicated daily in data visualisation sets (Pong 2020). Yet Pong also reminds us that pandemic time will be experienced differently depending on one's circumstances and location, since "we occupy dissonant, even if interconnected rhythms" (2020). For most academics, daily reading and writing now take place in makeshift home offices, urging us to pay attention to the folds of our own bodies as we research. We might follow Gros' exhortation for us to think of what we write as an "expression of physiology", where the felt presence of a seated writer ("doubled up,

stopped, shrivelled in on itself”) makes the narrative indigestible, but a book written by someone on the move acquires a sense of the walking body as “unfolded and tensed like a bow: opened to wide spaces like a flower to the sun, exposed torso, tensed legs, lean arms” (2014, 19).

Hisham Matar’s *A Month in Siena* is a walking book, a map folded into a hundred pages. Matar notes that Siena was the first Italian city to restrict access to its streets by motorised vehicles, back in the 1960s. The author’s explorations are therefore resolutely pedestrian, as he winds back and forth through the “folds of the city” (2019, 36) on foot. When darkness falls, the narrow, cobbled alleys and tall medieval buildings give him the sense of “entering a living organism. With every step I pressed deeper into it, and, as if in response, it made room. I was inside a place both known and deeply familiar” (2019, 9). Each step marks a physical contact: a corporeal impression made by the foot rather than a writerly inscription by the hand. Tim Ingold reminds us that footprints exert a physical pressure on the ground below them, and as such the impressions they leave are also temporary: the wet slick of a shoe’s tread on asphalt, indents in mud, snow or grass that will be washed away by rain or erased by other marks of subsequent passage (2010, 129). But Matar wants more than to impress himself onto the city, he wants his contact with the city to have an analogous physical effect on him: “like a stonemason grinding his chisel on a rough slab”, he wants to “sharpen (him)self against the city” (2019, 49). This mutual bodily “brushing up” (see Dinshaw 1999) that leaves both city and walker changed by the encounter reminds us that the ground we walk upon “is not a white page, but an intricate design of historical and geographical sedimentation’ on which the pedestrian adds another layer to those already present” (Careri 2002, 150). Matar’s impressionistic, palimpsestic walking is the opposite of the drive for colonial conquest inscribed in maps that erroneously and conveniently assumed previously blank spaces on which the author “can exercise his own will” (see De Certeau 1984, 134).

Siena is no such passive canvas to Matar’s wanderings. The city “engineers” conversations (2019, 13) and engineers itself into conversations – to the author, it seems to be the one “determining the pace and direction of my walks” (2019, 50). As a walled and strangely self-sufficient organism, it affords no view of the horizon, encapsulating its own universe. “My compass could only be guided by it, by its twists and turns, its manoeuvres and decisions, by its tastes and purposes. Siena is its own North Star” (Matar 2019, 50). Matar decides to test out its frontiers, by walking each day to one of the city gates and once he can no longer see the city, to return to it, and in so doing to experience the “transformative possibility of crossing a threshold” (2019, 10). Cassano terms Ulysses the enduring archetype of the “Mediterranean man” precisely because of his desire both to wander and explore, whilst at the same time still desiring to return home (2012, 36). This dance with limits leads to self-definition through the encounter with the other. “On the frontier, on the limit, each of us ends and is defined, acquires one’s shape, accepts to be limited by something else that is obviously also limited by us” (Cassano 2012, 42). The definition that borders provide is lost in infinite views of the horizon, triggering a sense of claustrophobia that can be countered by practices of microspeciation, compartmentalisation and “cordoning off” (Matar 2019, 51). And so the desire to be lost within the micro-folds of the city returns. The map Matar once spread out on a small table at home to consult is left at home when he



walks his circuitous paths of departure and return (2019, 50). The written account of his walks gathered up into the pages of the book functions as his map, a map gifted to his reader, where we find tucked in the folds and margins the traces of other Mediterranean pasts – in Jordan, Libya, and elsewhere.

## Stumbling

The debris accumulates near the frontier. (Cassano 2012, 45)

Jacir's proposal with *stazione* was, then, to add Arabic translations to the names of the vaporetto stops along the Grand Canal in Venice. This is a route that passes buildings whose names speak of Arabic connections (such as the Arsenale, which comes from the Arabic "dar-al-sina'a") or that were influenced by Arabic architecture. But, as Jean Fisher points out, Venice was also one of the "stations" through which medieval pilgrims passed on their way to the "Holy Land", of which *stazione* was meant as a "poetic acknowledgment" (2015, 30). Cultural ties between Venice and the Arab world also run deep: the archetypal Venetian craft of Murano glassblowing was originally practised by the Phoenicians, then brought to Venice during the Roman period, and "still exists as a family



**Figure 1.** Emily Jacir, *stazione* 2008-2009. Public intervention on Line 1 vaporetto stops, Venice, Italy. Commissioned for Palestine c/o Venice, collateral event of the 53rd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia © Emily Jacir, photograph by Michael Agee.

workshop tradition in Hebron” (Fisher 2009, 796). Jacir’s idea was to evidence these communalities and to commemorate the long history of reciprocal influences between Venice and the Arab world. The artist intended it as a “celebration of that history” (Fusi 2015, 52), not as a challenge to either of its constituent parts.

I mentioned above that *stazione* was never exhibited at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009 as planned. In fact, it was censored. No full explanation for its removal from the Biennale programme was ever given to Jacir by the organisers, the water bus company or the municipality of Venice; there were only “vague allusions” made to “political pressure from an outside source, and equally oblique references to the Gaza bombing” (Fisher 2009, 798). Shifting tack with excuses and silences shows how things are stopped, when what stops movement moves itself. As Sara Ahmed explains: “When the mechanisms for stopping something are mobile, to witness the movement can mean to miss the mechanism” (2019, 153). The censorship that *stazione* came up against was a blockage, yet Jacir’s project did not shatter on impact with it – perhaps because the disruption only served to replicate the point of what her work is always trying to show.

The art of Emily Jacir is full of delays, deferrals and disruptions. Her works [...] tend to concern moments of rupture, destruction, extreme violence and palpable dispossession. At the heart of her practice is the experience of [...] a place being difficult, hard to reach, return to or revive; of a place being impossible to realize as a real place at all. (Wilson-Goldie 2015)

The issue here is spatial: raising a question about the space our society assigns to art, but also that which it concedes to dissent. The nature and role of art as social intervention changes if we restrict the scope of artworks to gallery spaces (as was the counter-suggestion of the Biennale organisers), rather than allowing them, physically and linguistically, to alter the “syntax of the city” (Parati 2015, 61). How do we hold on to the creative inscriptions that statements of protest effect, what Ahmed would call their “scratches”, how do we retain their status as testimony? “We can reach each other through what appears as damage, mere scratch and scribble. Complaints become writing on the wall: we were here, we did not get used to it” (Ahmed 2019, 217). Jacir’s map suggests a counterfactual presence mounted as a stance of dissent: people who stumble across the map in the future might well assume that the installation had once been in place, but any attempts to discover it in person would only lead to the revelation of its absence. Yet the map itself persists. For “when we are stopped from getting through, we have to find other methods for getting information out. We might have to make other uses of paper, queer uses – leaflets or letters or posts that can be shared [...] a tale without a trail” (Ahmed 2019, 217).

Sometimes we ourselves put obstacles in the pathway of progress. Hisham Matar originally decided to visit Siena after finishing his Pulitzer prize-winning book on Libya, *The Return* (2016). His trip to Italy marked twenty-five years of fascination with the Sienese school of art, which he developed as a passionate distraction in the aftermath of his father’s disappearance and presumed murder by Libyan government in 1990. Depleted by the emotional and intellectual labour required by this previous writing project, he decided to enact a pilgrimage to Siena: a spiritual quest that incorporated past and future journeys of both loss and growth within it. “I had come to grieve alone, to consider the new terrain and to work out how I might continue from



here" (Matar 2019, 67). The object of the quest here is an "instrument of insight" (Basu 2004, 162). But Matar is suspicious of his own desire to see Siena and its art: increasingly so as Siena begins to occupy in his mind "the sort of uneasy reverence the devout might feel towards Mecca or Rome or Jerusalem" (2019, 8). He begins to delay, to procrastinate, to put obstacles in his own path to reaching his destination. He decides to fly to Florence and walk: "I like the idea of small steps covering a long distance and of finally entering the city on foot" (2019, 1). But in a mundane accident, he twists his knee before departing – the sixty odd kilometres south through Tuscan hills now too much for him to contemplate with his injured leg. With no direct flights available due to his "reticence" at booking, he has to change planes in Zurich. Again, an obstacle presents itself, and the plane turns back over the Alps due to a technical fault. In a third attempt, he gets as far as Florence, but the night bus to Siena makes an unscheduled and scary stop to pick up passengers from an earlier bus that has broken down. All the omens are bad. Or are they? They nod to a forced deceleration, an acknowledgment of the physical and logistical efforts demanded by journeying, a rebellion against the seamlessness of fast travel. The trials of the journey require a deeper engagement with the environment, the need for problem-solving skills, and paying close attention, also to fellow passengers and sights glimpsed on the way (echoing Cassano's reminder that "going slow are the stations in between" [2012, 10]). There is something to be gained in a slow mode of arrival, the satisfaction experienced as fruit of challenges. Slow time is formed of chance encounters, of bumping into things and people, the experience of travelling on "a bus worn out by an upward climb" (Cassano 2012, 10).

Obstacles, then, can be productive and meaningful, as they can offer alternative routes as options and chance moments of revelation. Let us take one further step back in time to a different map point: Benghazi, in March 2012, when Hisham is in Libya with his wife, Diana Matar – an episode recounted both in *A Month in Siena*, and in *Diana's Evidence*. The couple go for a walk with their friend at night. Diana walks ahead, unable to hear more than snippets of their conversation because of the strong wind. She walks through the darkness, and stumbles on a patch of uneven earth. "Something cold came rushing through my body" (Matar 2014, 87). She had come across a small wall made of cement, about a foot high. An underground bunker, in which prisoners had been kept for years. When discovered after the fall of Benghazi, some were still alive. Although it is no more than a ruin now, Matar comments that "something remains in these places. I wasn't prepared for that" (2014, 128).

This is, in Caitlin DeSilvey's words, an example of "storying matter" (2017, 6): where what might seem like an obstacle to the walker's progress is actually the earthly sedimentation of narrative, its stratification, a sign of resistance taking root. Things tend to accumulate if they are not disturbed from doing so, since "the disarticulation of the object can lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies" (DeSilvey 2006, 324). And this potential for articulation is more likely in the Mediterranean, "with its sluggishness, with time and space that resist the laws of universal acceleration": southern obstacles now "become a resource" (Cassano 2012, 3). Southern thought means we have the time to slow down and look around, but also to look up, and to look down. We can pause to reflect on detail, and our "perception of the part, rather than the whole, opens up a space that invites speculation and connection" (DeSilvey 2017, 187).



**Figure 2.** Diana Matar, *Evidence / Evidence*. 2014 © Diana Matar.

## Contemplation

Going slow means [...] being faithful to our senses, tasting with our body the earth we cross.  
(Cassano 2012, 10)

But the Mediterranean is not only a repository of storied mobility; it also archives a long history of stunted, failed journeys. It is a mass grave, and not only for the thousands who have perished on migration journeys to Italy from the southern and eastern shores of the sea. The final image in Diana Matar's series of Libyan photos is a black and white close-up of the calm waters of the Mediterranean, where it is believed that the remains of the 1270 men massacred at the Abu Salim prison by government forces on 29 June 1996 were disposed of. Jaballa, Hisham Matar's father, is presumed to be one of those who died at the prison. The photo that follows this image of the sea signals an apparent change of tone. In the bright, Roman sunshine of late April, we see a tree with orange fruits, shot in colour, from below. Seven more photos of trees follow: some, brightly coloured in the daytime; others, illuminated by artificial light at night. They make up a series of portraits of trees or



**Figure 3.** Diana Matar, *Witness/Evidence*. 2014. © Diana Matar.

mature plants that are still to be found near the locations where a number of Libyan exiles were killed by the Gaddafi regime in Rome between 1980 and 1986. As the trees are the nearest living things to these scenes of execution, Matar treats them as crime witnesses, a status which holds a sense of ambivalence: are they implicated in what they have seen (where, as Rothberg would say, “implicated” means entangled, involved, or closely connected, “folded into (im-plied in) events that at first seem beyond our agency” [2019, 1]); or do they connote a more positive sign of continuity, of persistence, silent survival and the power of memory? When seen as “witness trees” (a term borrowed from an eponymous poem by Robert Frost from 1942), Matar’s Roman trees thus come to join the ranks of other “massive silent sentinels of history”, which the American Battlefield Trust often mark out with signs and labels at historic sites, and function as “biologically tenacious symbol(s) of the past” (Yessis 2017).

We look up at the Roman witness trees that Diana Matar has photographed – their tangled branches and folded shadows – much as we might look at paintings in churches



or galleries. The contemplation they demand combines the reverence one feels towards the trees as art objects (a contemplation that Hisham Matar describes as resembling *prayer* [2019, 14]) with the peaceful wellbeing that can be gained through looking at nature (where staring at the sea is equivalent to *praise* [Matar 2019, 14]). As living things, the trees also acquire the potential to communicate, or even to commune with the viewer, which is activated through contemplative looking. They “pull (us) back to (our) senses” (Tsing 2015, 1), incorporating us into each photographed scene and the history it holds. In their autonomous, uncontrolled life, the trees represent a “gift and a guide”, and they “can catapult us into the curiosity that [...] [is] the first requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times” (Tsing 2015, 2). One of the most detailed episodes recounted in *A Month in Siena* also takes place in Rome, during the same trip on which Diana photographed the series of witness trees in *Evidence*. After visiting the Galleria Borghese to see Caravaggio’s painting of *David with the Head of Goliath*, they walk down to the city centre from the Borghese park and pause in the gardens of Bernini’s baroque church of Sant’Andrea al Quirinale. The couple lie down on the grass side by side, Diana’s head resting on Hisham’s chest, Hisham lying with his head lower down on the slope than his chest.

I remember getting that odd feeling, a sort of mystery towards my own anatomy, [...] that an independent will operated these secret clocks inside of me, that the operations and very texture of my organs and the blood that ran through them belonged to some other order of existence that stood apart from my sense of my self, from my ideas and emotions. “I have such a beautiful perspective,” Diana said suddenly. (Matar 2019, 23)

Hisham’s perspective is of the canopy of the large pine tree overhead, yet his mind is tuned in towards his interior, corporeal sensations – he cannot know or experience the beauty of Diana’s own viewpoint, or the trains of thought that her perspective might engender. The sight of the pine branches above brings into sharp focus to the author how our lives are restricted by the solitary nature of perspective and yet redeemed by our desire to be let into someone else’s. In the same way, pilgrimage is both a shared and an individual venture too, becoming a “transcendental epiphany of connectedness”: for “what empowers these journeys and imbues them with an aura of the sacred is this very convergence of socializing and personalizing trajectories: a quasi-mystical finding of oneself in others and others in oneself” (Basu 2004, 168). As his long rumination on perspective comes to an end, Hisham fears that the intimate moment between the couple on the grass will be disturbed as Diana shifts position. But a miracle happens in stasis, in the feat of not moving, as she settles back again and her body finds the exact same place on her husband’s chest as before (Matar 2019, 34).

Back in Siena, Hisham lies down once more, alone this time, on the central square of the Campo, having spent some time contemplating Lorenzetti’s frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico. He lies on the brick tiles, warmed by the sun, and “polished by centuries of pedestrians and horses and carts”, and remembers his late father speaking to him in Italian (Matar 2019, 46) – a language he does not speak. His father would find amusement in his son’s inability to understand him, but Hisham remembers feeling floored by the sudden mystery of his father, his foreignness, “how stonily impenetrable his thoughts seemed” (2019, 46). The memory makes Matar reflect on his first forays in the National

Gallery in London, which would see him spend his lunch hour in deep contemplation of one picture, and only after a full week of visits had passed would he feel able to move on. What strikes him in his current, supine position is that he was looking for traces of his father in these moments of contemplation, and that although this venture has failed, he has retained his method of slow looking as the most productive and revelatory way of experiencing art.

A picture changes as you look at it and changes in ways that are unexpected. I have discovered that a painting takes time. Now it takes me several months and more often than not a year before I can move on. (Matar 2019, 4)

In Siena's Pinacoteca, the guards convince him to borrow a chair to facilitate his long contemplations of individual paintings. Resistant at first ("I preferred to stand, there was something about being able to move, to go closer, walk back, that was necessary" [2019, 75]), Hisham soon finds that the chair has become an invaluable prop and companion to his method of slow looking: "I was now able to spend even longer in front of a picture" (2019, 75). I borrow this sense of Hisham's contemplation as slow looking from Arden Reed's work (2017, 2019). Reed sees slow art as characterised by participatory, dynamic intimate encounters, akin to religious practices during the ages of faith. He asks: "Might experiencing art at a different pace reclaim social spaces evacuated by religious gazing? Could 'slow art' be a modern, secular displacement of old sacred practices?" (Reed 2017)

I myself wonder if – rather than *replacing* sacred practices – some artworks demand that we experience them precisely as if they were part of a pilgrimage. Jacir's *Via Crucis* (2014–15) is a permanent installation in the side aisles of the San Raffaele Arcangelo church in Milan, commissioned by artache. Jacir displays a series of Palestinian relics underneath fourteen aluminium *tondi* that mark alternative stations of the cross (half the stations are marked in Arabic, and half in Italian). This is, in John Lansdowne's words, "a story told in things" (2016, 4): things that range from a black and white *keffiyeh*, to barbed wire and spent Israeli artillery shells, to traditional embroidered dress, olive wood and fishing nets, through which Jacir spins a story of Palestinian destruction, loss and diaspora, but also of creativity, craft, resourcefulness and resilience. Following the new stations of Jacir's cross requires both sides of the devotional art experience to be activated: the circular movement around single objects to form a route with meaning, and the close contemplation of each individual station. The objects speak to the contemporary experience of Palestine but also to that of Lampedusa, where Jacir spent a formative month in 2013. Objects such as the photograph of a migrant family, the fishing nets and the pieces of boat wood take on new meanings when they conjoin the Palestinian experience with that of Mediterranean migration. And when told through the lens of an allegory of Christ's Passion, they also work to reference the huge number of relics brought to Europe via the Crusades, becoming a new collection of "mirabilia". They reference and revive the memory of past journeys between Italy and Palestine that might also have taken place as part of a solely "mental journey", in which the deep contemplation of devotional images in churches across Italy "amounted to [...] a pilgrimage by proxy" (Lansdowne 2016, 8). The saint that the church is named after, San Raffaele Arcangelo, is the patron saint of travellers, and given its location in central Milan, Jacir hoped that her new *Via Crucis* would act as a new community hub

for migrants from the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean passing through the city. “Avevo la speranza che quei profughi della Siria, dell’Iraq, o della Palestina, entrando nella chiesa di San Raffaele, si sentissero un po’ a casa” (De Leonardis, 2016) [I hoped that if those refugees from Syria, Iraq and Palestine came into the church of San Raffaele, they would feel at home]. By tracing throughlines of connection and belonging from place to place and through multiple times, Jacir’s *Via Crucis* “builds narrative continuity, assembling an interconnected history for a people dispersed geographically” (Demos 2013, 118): both international migrants and members of the Palestinian diaspora. And it is in the act of slow contemplation that she hopes a new sense of (Mediterranean) community will eventually form.

## Conviviality

In its names and bodies, in its histories, the Other has always been present (Cassano 2012, 147)

Following slowness and contemplation, the third of Cassano’s southern values is conviviality – a sense of community that grows through going slow, but is also fostered and encouraged in a Mediterranean space that exists along a circular ridge of geographical borders and historic frontiers, in which “no single culture or tradition has ever successfully imposed a unified vision; continents, religions, and ethnicities have met without one prevailing permanently over the others” (Bouchard and Ferme 2013, 81). This sense of multiplicity is activated by a focus on the sea itself as a dynamic border that allows for diverse sets of relationships and contacts to develop. As such, the communal Mediterranean sea-as-border “interrupts the rule of identity, and forces one to accommodate division” (Cassano 2012, 18). This is a political as well as a cultural imperative.

The hybridization of cultures and people weakens all claims to exclusivity, purity, and integrity, as the Mediterranean knows well, having been fraught, from time immemorial, with intertwined stories, mestizos, migrations, and shelters. (Cassano 2012, 147)

In landlocked Siena, Hisham Matar illustrates this blueprint for a new Mediterranean community through a series of encounters with interlocutors from a variety of “southern” backgrounds. These are not natives of Siena, but a diverse set of people who have made the city their home in a second or subsequent instance. The first such encounter Matar has is with an elderly woman on a bench outside the Duomo, who is waiting for the ministry to open so that she can deposit her application for an Italian passport. After twenty-three years in Italy, her desire is to go back and visit her home country of Nigeria (Matar 2019, 48). Aware that he is in contact with a pilgrimage not unlike his own, Matar decides to delay his long-awaited visit to the Pinacoteca that morning, and instead keeps the woman company until the ministry opens. She is generous in her communication with him, understanding his lack of Italian, and they are able to speak despite the linguistic barriers they face. “I wished her luck. She placed a hand on my cheek and thanked me. Her skin felt cool and dry. We embraced and I watched her until she entered the building” (Matar 2019, 49). Following this encounter that is marked by a slow sense of patience, Matar hears a man speak to his children in Arabic as he wanders around the city, and introduces himself to Adam, a Jordanian who has been living in Italy for thirty years. Adam immediately extends unlimited offers of help and



friendship to Matar: “Anything you need, consider me your brother here” (Matar 2019, 53). Matar visits the family at their house some days afterwards, and learns of the community’s welcome of Adam’s son, Kareem, into their local quarter or *contrada* (Matar 2019, 74), how he was gifted a non-religious “baptism” certificate and his birth celebrated with a street party. The statement of community that the mayor of the *contrada* welcomed Kareem with stands in stark contrast to so much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric common nowadays in Italy: he promises that “from now on they would look after him, that wherever he goes this will be his home” (Matar 2019, 74). Matar also becomes close to his Italian teacher, Sabri, who is originally from Calabria. Matar comments that Calabria is nearly as far from Siena as it is from Libya, “and therefore we immediately felt the alliance of those from the south, a division and demarcation that is real and powerful in Italy” (2019, 57). This Mediterranean conviviality sketches new hybrid communities that exceed the nation state and are made up of a mosaic of languages, spaces and historical moments: as Sabri and Matar chat on a bench, they discover that the Italian word *baracca* (kiosk) is also used in Libya, alongside other Italian words that passed into the Libyan dialect during the Italian colonisation of the country in the first half of the twentieth century (2019, 58).

This linguistic mosaic designating the passage of peoples and cultures through different Mediterranean spaces demonstrates the need for translations and conversations that include a reflection on the violent entanglements of past colonial contact (Cassano 2012, 3). One evening Matar comes across footage of the 1939 documentary *Tripolitania* playing on Italian television and is struck by how the lens of the Italian camera “eras(es) figures and objects from view” (the Libyan background context) in order to focus on a bellicose young Italian boy “loading and firing imaginary rockets” (2019, 63). But the roundtable discussion afterwards is stuck in sentimentality for the past (and present) – there is no critical engagement either with the contemporary situation in Libya, nor the legacies of Italian colonial atrocities. In contrast, Diana’s insertion of the names of the Roman streets where Libyan dissidents were murdered in plain sight in the 1980s once more implicates Italy’s lived cartography into a shared history of violence: these are well-known streets such as Via del Castro Pretorio, Via Veneto, Piazza Cavour, Via Principe Amedeo and Via Gioberti. A new, southern-facing map of Rome is being drawn up and translated through cultural prisms so as to incorporate other times and elsewhere spaces. Diana also includes a press image in *Evidence* of proud, fighting Libyan rebels during the Italian occupation of Libya, guns raised on horseback, in order to illustrate the 2011 uprisings against the Gaddafi regime, collapsing time so as to confront the present legacies of the past. Stories of strength and resistance not only connect temporal points but also unite countries along the shores of the Mediterranean: Labanca comments that one of the principal streets in Palestine is named after Omar al-Mukhter, leader of the Libyan anti-colonial resistance, who was hanged by the Italians in 1931, dislocating any stable sense of “national” memory-at-work (Labanca 2010, 13).

For without clear evidence and meaningful memorialisation, things risk getting lost in translation. Jacir’s ongoing work *Material for a Film* (2005–) pieces together the fragments of the parallel story of another assassination in Rome: this time of Palestinian translator Wael Zuaiter, as part of Israel’s retaliation attacks following the 1972 Munich massacre. At the time of his death, Zuaiter was translating *One Thousand and One Nights* into

Italian and had the second volume of tales in his jacket pocket. It was struck by a Mossad bullet during Zuaite's assassination in Rome's Piazza Annibaliano, on 16 October 1972, and the bullet lodged in its pages. Jacir's multiform work aims to perform a "recuperative reconstitution" of both Zuaite's life, and his death (Kholeif 2015, 17).

It is a memorial to untold stories. To that which has not been translated. To stories that will never be written. To the refusal to perform tragic stories for people to read. The one bullet hole of Wael's story serves as an entrance into all the other stories. (Vali 2007)

The hole left by the Israeli bullet functions much like the entry point of Duccio di Buoninsegna's work for Hisham Matar. Duccio is Matar's focus when he first develops an interest in the Sienese school, and the paintings he encounters leave him initially "feeling unprepared and in need of translation" (2019, 6). Over twenty-five years of slow communion with Duccio's work, Matar grasps that it functions as the "door" or "source" through which all subsequent artists of the Sienese school flowed. Duccio's door allowed for an "exchange of ideas", a conversation around the potentiality of engagement between artist and viewer, and artist and subject, that points to the optimism of collaboration, since "what we share is more than what sets us apart" (2019, 7). This belief echoes Jacir's affirmation that Zuaite's story "is also an Italian history" (Vali 2007) and speaks of her desire to draw together diasporic communities through both "artistic mediation" and "subjective connections" (Demos 2013, 118). This would have been reinforced through the act of cultural translation enacted by Jacir's *stazione*, where the juxtaposition of Arabic and Italian signs was meant to "establish a bilingual cross-system of linguistic and cultural references" (Fusi 2015, 52). But a redemptive system of translation (or indeed, *translatio*) is at last established in *Via Crucis*, where the practice of bringing relics from the Holy Land to Europe is folded into a "wider and less stable" map, (Chambers 2010, 1) which details the many movements of objects, images, people, and place between the two. Translation here is not just cultural but geographical, a nomadic seeking that is nonetheless tied to the land through sensory and territorial attachment (see Gansel 2017). A more capacious imaginary of Italian space, which includes the transit points of today's migrant detention centres and former colonial prisons at Gaeta, Caserta, and on Favignana, Ustica and Ponza (see Re 2010, 50), is mapped out by the cultural pilgrimages of Emily Jacir, Diana Matar and Hisham Matar. These are pilgrimages which also *re-place* material, cultural and memorial relics from the southern and eastern Mediterranean into Italian spaces in a new process of *translatio*. This is Italy viewed through a southern lens, whose links with other Mediterranean countries are reactivated through an understanding of its history of migration and its trade routes, its status as both a coloniser and a colonised entity (Kholeif 2015, 17). We each have our own part to play in constructing this newly imagined European map: in our encounters with works of art such as these, we must use our own interpretations, and "develop our own translations" (Fisher 2015, 34). As Hisham Matar says, the "subjective life of the observer is required in order to complete the picture" (2019, 7). There is renewed hope to be found in the sharing of experience through methods of slow and vertical engagement.

## Conclusions

Going slow is to respect time, inhabit it with few things of great value, with boredom and nostalgia (Cassano 2012, 10)

Published in 2019, *A Month in Siena* seems to anticipate the heightened mix of emotions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic of the following year. One of Hisham Matar's last visits is to the decorated chapel of the Palazzo Pubblico, painted by Taddeo di Bartolo in the early years of the fifteenth century, which marks a distinct departure from the earlier works of the Sienese school. The distinction was drawn by the arrival of the Black Death in 1348 and its devastating aftermath. The catastrophe of the plague altered notions of life and death: indeed, "it was the end of time" (2019, 83). The Christian optic in Europe cast the disease as a just punishment for guilt and sin; the overwhelming fear and panic caused "violent sectarianism and social division" (2019, 90).

It was as if Europe had woken up and discovered it had all along been living in the kingdom of death. It wanted this to be expressed in art. It feared forgetting. It trusted in that fear, and wanted to communicate and propagate it. The plague had traumatized the imagination. (2019, 92)

Matar interweaves contemporary accounts of the Black Death with reports of the disposals of the bodies of dissidents and political victims in modern Libya; reading it today, it is impossible to encounter this multi-layered history of death and loss without thinking of the COVID-19 pandemic. Death is ever-present in the daily figures and comparative statistics we have access to today; faith (be it religious, political, or societal) has once again become a "space of doubt" (Matar 2019, 95).

Two methods of embracing what Cassano sees as a Mediterranean propensity towards melancholy, boredom and nostalgia are extended by the works of art examined here. First, collecting evidence collating memories and material into a recovery plan becomes crucial, so that "every precious detail of a culture faced with the threat of oblivion (is) salvaged" (Fisher 2015, 33). Art such as Emily Jacir's and Diana Matar's bears witness to absence and offers wholesale "resistance to cultural erasure" (Fisher 2015, 31). The second is that we ourselves undertake to endorse and practise southern values of slowness, contemplation and conviviality in our work and in our responses to the work of others. Drawing on Spivak, David Huddart advocates for slow reading as the utmost responsibility of the critic, the only way possible to attend to the uneven planetary conditions that have been caused by colonialism (2014, 122). "Only through slow and patient negotiations of reading and writing can we adequately relate the nodes that, with varying levels of connectedness, make up our world" (2014, 132). Slowness is an antidote not only to the accelerated rhythms of capitalist progress, but it also counters derogatory notions of belatedness that have so often characterised representations of the south. Indeed, Hisham Matar finds Siena, his own Mediterranean point of pilgrimage, to be perfectly *in time*. "I never felt rushed or felt myself hurried by anything. Everything I experienced was happening at the pace at which it ought to happen" (2019, 97). Slowness is necessary to form considered understandings of blockages but also to promote deep understanding and lasting impressions. This is a call to us all as writers and readers to attend not only to *what* we read and write, but *how* we do so: to reflect on what remains left behind in our notes, the sentences we skip, the words we stumble over, the location of our blind spots on the folds and creases of pages. "When we slow down our reading and thinking, we can be truly critical and attend to the decisions and omissions that necessarily structure our knowledge but that cannot be allowed to go unconsidered and

unremembered" (Huddart, 2014, 128). The pandemic has slowed down time for so many of us; let us take the opportunity to think, read and write more slowly as we map out new routes of vertical travel in its wake.

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