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**“From One Shore to the Other”:
Other Revolutions in the Interstices of the Revolution**

An Interview with Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi

Tunis, May 18, 2015

Abstract: This interview with Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi focuses on the campaign of the families of the missing Tunisian migrants, “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter”. The campaign started in 2011 to demand that Italian and Tunisian institutions be held accountable for the disappearance of young Tunisian migrants who crossed the Mediterranean to Italy. The campaign brought together the families of Tunisian migrants and the Italian feminist collective *Le Venticinqueundici* as part of a migration struggle that involves the entire region but is rarely taken up as a cross-shore militant campaign. The conversation between Soltani and Sossi illustrates the strengths of the campaign and the difficulties that arose in running it across shores, and offers a theoretical reflection on the notion of political recognition in an effort to decolonize the gaze on what counts as political subjectivity and political struggle.

Keywords: Mediterranean, border-deaths, missing migrants, Tunisia, militant campaigns, fingerprints, DNA exchange.

The interview took place in the café of the Hotel de France in Tunis on May 18, 2015, where Martina Tazzioli met with Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi. Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi have been participating in the campaign of the families of the missing Tunisian migrants, “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter” since 2011. Upon inviting the interviewees, the guest editors shared a draft of the special issue’s introduction and of the questions that would be asked.

Introduction

Soon after the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution, thousands of young Tunisians left the country by boat and arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Taking advantage of the loosened border-checks on the Tunisian shoreline,ⁱ they acted on their newly attained

freedom as a freedom of movement. Some made it across, some died at sea, while others “disappeared,” i.e. their families lost touch with them, but the boats they were traveling on were not reported as shipwrecked by national authorities. The campaign “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter” deals with these disappeared migrants. Started in 2011 by the families of a group of about 300 missing Tunisian migrants and by the Italian feminist collective *Le Venticinqueundici*, the campaign demanded that Tunisian and Italian authorities be held accountable for these missing migrants and collaborate in searching for them.

The name of the campaign, “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter”, is meant to underline two things. First, it suggests that the struggle to search for these migrants has been a cross-Mediterranean one, bringing together Tunisian and Italian groups. Second, the name points out that while these migrants’ presence may not have been reported on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, these are lives that are missing from the Tunisian side of the Mediterranean and missed by their families and friends.

The campaign asked the Italian and Tunisian governments to collaborate on a fingerprint check, which would compare the fingerprints of these missing migrants within Tunisian national records with those within the records of Italian police and border authorities.ⁱⁱ After many sit-ins and demonstrations in support of this request, the two governments accepted to do the fingerprint exchange. No positive result was found. In 2012 some of the families formed the association *La Terre pour Tous* and demanded the establishment of a court of inquiry on the case, both at the Tunisian national level and at the level of the European Union. The families requested the use of technical tools usually at the service of border-work and securitarian agendas (e.g. radar images of the days of the boats’ departure) to retrace what happened to their sons. They also requested a DNA exchange on the few corpses that had subsequently been found and attributed to their sons to check if the identities corresponded. In May 2015 Tunisia established the court of inquiry and Italy agreed to collaborate in the investigation.

Although documented deaths and disappearances of migrants crossing the Mediterranean date back to the 1990s, this campaign is the first movement organized in Tunisia directly by the families of missing migrants and openly denouncing visa policies and states’ responsibility in causing these border-deaths, the actual deadly outcomes of migration politics.ⁱⁱⁱ

Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi have been part of the campaign “From One Shore to the Other” and the struggle that led to the opening of the court of inquiry.

The Interview

Martina Tazzioli: *How did the campaign “From One Shore to the Other: Lives That Matter” begin?*

Imed Soltani: Everything started when these 300 migrants left Tunisia by boat to go to Europe, soon after the revolution, in March 2011. Their boats were found on March 1st, 14th and 29th. The struggle started in front of the Tunisian Home Office in the spring of 2011. I was there since my brother’s sons were among those who left by boat in March 2011 and were missing. I went to the Home Office asking to know what happened to them, and I realized that, like me, many other families were also there to protest for the same issue. This made me realize that this case was not only a personal issue, and I felt it was time to turn this into a political battle and ask the Tunisian government to know what happened to our relatives. Moreover, since the first meeting with the families, it became clear that most missing migrants were from poor families, from the *banlieues* of Tunis. The effects of migration policies are particularly visible on those people who come from these popular and poor milieus; so it became clear to me that it was precisely there, from these peripheral neighborhoods, that we had to build a political force. Yet until the end of 2011 there was no association; we were a spontaneous and self-organized movement, formed by the families of the missing migrants. Then, in 2012, we decided to constitute ourselves as an association since we realized this could be the only way for discussing with the Tunisian state and that it would make our demand stronger.

The association *La Terre pour Tous* works with all the families of missing migrants, and we made this association in order to sustain and continue the struggle. But we are not an association similar to others—we are all presidents of it. We demand that the Tunisian government, and the Italian government as well, tell us what happened to the missing migrants, as the two governments are the real ones responsible of these disappearances, they produced this situation through their migration policies and bilateral agreements. So that’s why it should be their business to tell us what happened to the missing migrants.

But I would like to stress that our struggle for knowing what happened to these missing migrants is part of a larger political project that opposes the EU system of migration policies and visas. While we won’t stop fighting alongside the families of missing migrants, we also support the struggle of those who are still here in Tunisia and who want migrate, those who want to leave. In fact, a group of young *harraga*^{iv} of the peripheral neighborhood of Tunis is part of the association. These are young people who want to go to Italy and who

are thinking about doing it in the only possible way for them, that is to say, via the dangerous crossing by boat. We want to fight against the fact that this is the only possibility left to Tunisians, and we want to say loud and clear that the only way to stop deaths at sea consists in abolishing the European visa regime that makes it impossible for Tunisians to travel safely to Europe.

Federica Sossi: The campaign started in 2011, when Martina Tazzioli and I came to Tunisia some months after the outbreak of the revolution. My interest for Tunisia started soon after the revolution and was rooted in the revolutionary process and touched on what happened in terms of migration. I believe that young Tunisians who left Tunisia towards Italy and Europe—without distinguishing so much between Italy and Europe since the way through the island of Lampedusa was their only possible way to Europe—simply exercised what I would call their *desire for freedom of movement*. I wouldn't call it a right to freedom of movement but a desire for such freedom: I believe that this desire was part of the revolutionary process, that it was an additional element of the Tunisian revolution. This is something that has not been fully understood by the people who remained here, in Tunisia, I mean. We could even suggest that perhaps the non-understanding of this further element contributed to revolution's retreat from itself, that this migratory inflection of the Tunisian revolution was problematically overlooked by a state-oriented and institutional approach to the revolution that remained internal to Tunisia and overlooked migration. So we came here for these reasons in 2011.

At the beginning of our journey we spoke to different associations, and one of them, the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*, told us about the situation of families that lost contact with their sons who left for Italy and were searching for them. At the time it was possible that some of those missing people could have been in Italian detention centers or in the new spaces of detention that the then Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni “invented” and improvised precisely for putting Tunisians there. So we got in touch with these families and when I returned to Italy I started searching for their sons, engaging also some friends and activists. Since I was part of the feminist collective *Le Venticinqueundici*,^v and since I was planning, together with the families, to launch an appeal to the Italian and Tunisian governments demanding them to take responsibility for these missing migrants, I asked the collective if they were interested in supporting the campaign. So that's how the campaign started. We decided to call it “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter” to underline

that it wasn't only a campaign for supporting or helping these particular families but, rather, a campaign effectively carried out across the two shores of the Mediterranean.

One of the reasons why our feminist collective decided to engage with this campaign was the consideration that the disappearances and deaths of migrants are completely ignored as regards to the pain that they provoke in their families and supporting networks—an element that is seldom commented on, especially when talking about the political responsibility for these deaths. The politics of people's mobility is actually a much broader politics, which concerns people's feelings and extends to a wider range of people, not only the migrants who travel but their whole affective context. It is the story of these pains and feelings of loss, this wider context of migration policies—the policies which produce the disappearance and death of people who simply enact their freedom of movement—that should be told on the other shore of the Mediterranean, on the Northern shore. On the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, in fact, people speak of nameless people, deploy a rhetoric of *untold names*, turning people into numbers and not considering that such a rhetoric contributes to making people anonymous despite the fact that these people are not isolated subjects, that they are situated in a context where they are surrounded by feelings, where they are sons, daughters, brothers, husbands, wives, and friends of someone else. (Maybe now this anonymity has slightly decreased after all the news about shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, but it is still the case.) Nobody takes this affective aspect into consideration. For our collective to take into account also this element meant a little revolution inside the context of the Italian and the European antiracism movement; a little revolution that nobody followed, I have to add.

Martina Tazzioli: Could you expand on the rhetoric of not naming the victims of shipwrecks by linking it to the notion of political recognition? Your academic work importantly challenges Judith Butler's theory on this issue while also drawing on her work as the name of the campaign suggests when it refers to "lives that matter". Indeed, with respect to Butler's theory, you make a sort of decolonial move, contending that a politics of recognition in terms of migrants' disappearance can't dismiss the relational dimension in which these people were situated ...

Federica Sossi: Without going too much in detail about Butler¹, I can say that on this specific point we had a discussion within the collective *Le Venticinqueundici* when we decided together the title of the campaign, trying to choose it together with the Tunisian families who were a bit perplexed about the idea of lives that “matter” and instead were more keen on calling it “Where Are Our Sons?”. Butler uses the expression “lives that matter and lives that do not matter”. For us, instead, it was important to get rid of this notion of lives that “do not matter”, in the sense that the negative expression depends on a gaze that is fully situated on the hegemonic side—on the side of power, of the government over lives which dictate lives’ hierarchies, of a hegemonic space. In the specific case of the campaign, “lives that matter” indicates that if one looks from the Southern shore of the Mediterranean—not through a gaze that, coming from Italy or Europe, orients itself toward the South but, rather, through a gaze positioned on the Southern shore—lives do matter. Lives generate pain insofar as they are missing, as they are the lives of sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, friends who are missing. In other words, Butler’s analysis about lives that matter and lives that do not matter importantly touches upon the hierarchization of spaces in our present; but in a certain way, precisely while it denounces such a hierarchization, this analysis remains tied to it.

Beyond Butler, this can be said about migrants without names, about the untold names of migrants. Missing migrants have a first name, a surname, they have mothers who gave birth to them, relatives who were part of their growing up; they have brothers, sisters, and friends. They certainly find no name in the places they migrate to, but they have a name, many names, in the places where they leave from, as they are *missing people and missed people*. Our collective got to know this “being missed” and this experienced “lack of” when we met the mothers and the families of these missing migrants in Tunisia. The problem for us became how to take this into account while being ourselves situated on the Northern shore. We have had many discussions about how to use a different rhetoric and how to deconstruct the rhetoric of nameless migrants and their untold names and stories. For a short time we succeeded, I think. And to be working across shores worked very well because it brought the pain and its aggressiveness into the campaign; it gave the struggle its force, making it a

¹ See: Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso; Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*. Verso Books.

struggle for the lack of sons on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean. The pain originating from this loss changed our approach to the issue over time; it was the extremely political dimension of that pain that came to the fore for us—the fact that, thanks to the revolutionary context, such a pain could be on the political scene and add a further layer to the revolutionary practices of that period. In this regard it would be important to reflect on the weakening of the revolutionary process in Tunisia. By the way, the families of the missing migrants are those who, even after years, are among the few subjects keeping the revolutionary practice of transformation open—precisely because they work on their own pain, are pushed by their affects, and are faced with an absence that is not death, precisely because they are faced with something that is not an “end”. something that is missing but is not closed as an end.

What has been the relevance of this campaign's struggle for Tunisia and for the revolution? How has this struggle of the families of disappeared migrants succeeded in carrying the revolution on, differently from other struggles here in Tunisia?

Imed Soltani: When Ben Ali was in power, you could not talk about dead or missing migrants in Tunisia. With the revolution, the struggle of the families of missing migrants became politically possible, so it's a struggle grounded on the Tunisian revolution and it is still continuing these days. We have not succeeded in finding out the truth about missing migrants yet, but we are going on and won't give up. The European Union knew very well that in Tunisia it was forbidden to talk about missing migrants. It is in this situation that European states signed bilateral agreements with Tunisia with migration clauses that blocked people in Tunisia, preventing them from leaving. When the revolution broke out, 42,000 Tunisians went to Europe by boat: this has been our revolution as well. Let me make this point more clearly: if Tunisian politics would respect its own citizens, if there were other possibilities for leaving the country, nobody would have taken a chance on these risky journeys across the Mediterranean. It's important to underline that the disappearance of these young Tunisians comes from European politics—this must be said over and over to the European Union—and that behind these young disappeared people are their families who have been suffering for over five years now.

Federica Sossi: I would like to add something about what Imed just said with an example which illustrates how the struggle of missing migrants entails an upheaval of Tunisian,

European, and Mediterranean spaces, as well as an upheaval of the space of language. It would be very easy to say that after four years it doesn't make any sense to speak about "missing" migrants and to argue that if these guys never called their families it is because that they are dead. But saying something like this would mean that I can't work with the families any longer—it would mean saying that these families are a little bit crazy and that I should stop working with them. Every time we speak with the families, also on the public scene, it is necessary to evaluate our language. Up to the moment when the political actors responsible for these disappearances tell us what happened, we cannot know what in fact happened, and consequently we cannot even name it. I believe that the shipwreck of September 6th 2012 actually took place; I became convinced of this also after talking with fishermen in Lampedusa who told me about it. But the Tunisian families don't talk about a shipwreck. Here in Tunisia we even have survivors of that shipwreck—and Imed and I will speak with them later, at the end of our interview with you. They know that a shipwreck happened. But the families of missing migrants don't want us to speak of a shipwreck, as they are not convinced of that. It follows that if we want to dialogue with these families, we have to avoid the word "shipwreck". And thus, what can we say? We cannot even name something that happened, because, indeed, we don't know what happened. Since those responsible for what happened refuse to say what happened, this event cannot be named. And in my opinion this is also something upon which we should reflect ...

Imed Soltani: Actually, the families would have been open to know the truth about the deaths of their sons if there was evidence of that. But they refuse to say that their sons died as there is nothing of concrete that proves this. They want concrete evidence and we of *La Terre pour Tous* engage in fighting these European politicians that keep hiding the truth.

Can you comment on the political visibility of the campaign and of the struggle of the families of missing migrants? It seems that the struggle started without any political visibility, in a time when the families' claim was politically dismissed, despite the fact that many families in Tunisia had relatives who went missing in migration. Yet little by little the campaign started to gain a certain visibility in the Tunisian public debate and in Europe as well. Do you think this visibility has in some way weakened or neutralized a movement whose force relied on its dissonance with respect to citizens' politics within the constraint of the political space of citizenship?

Federica Sossi: A two-fold invisibility has characterized the struggle of the families of the missing migrants. The first level of invisibility refers to something that struck me during my first trip to Tunisia in 2011: despite the fact that people would leave for Europe in the sunlight, so to speak, and that people talked about it, there was simultaneously a sort of shadow looming over this topic. Everybody used to talk about these migrations but not in an explicit or public way. Migration was something everybody enacted or something everyone had at least a direct or indirect experience about, but that was not part of public discourse. In fact, migration was neither part of a reactionary political discourse—a counter-revolutionary discourse even—nor was it part of revolutionary discourse. Partly this was due to the fact that the revolutionary movement failed to understand what happened in regard to the young guys who left the country in the aftermath of the revolution. The demand of the families of the missing migrants was situated in the context of this shadow, of this reticence.

But, at the same time, the families acted irrespective of a preoccupation with visibility. I don't think that they acted in order to be visible; they were not interested at all in being visible, they wanted their sons back. They were convinced that their sons were in Italy and thus they acted simply based on that. As part of the feminist collective *Le Venticinqueundici*, we partly followed the families in this working irrespective of the issue of visibility—this was also motivated by the fact that as Italians and residents of Italy, we had all experienced a political moment in Italy when visibility was the primary issue of migrant struggles, the condition of possibility of any struggle and, most importantly, a goal in itself for struggles. As a group, we were all quite tired of that, tired of this goal of becoming visible, not only in the public sphere but also in the virtual world of the internet. On this point we were close to the Tunisian mothers of the missing migrants. In fact, we never called journalists to give resonance to the campaign. Rather, at some point journalists started to come to us and even then we were quite selective in responding to them.

Another element of non-visibility concerns the way in which the families and the mothers of missing migrants decided to stay in the street, in the public street. They were there not only with their own bodies but also with the photo of their missing son or daughter. In this way they sort of made their presence spill over to evoke the presence of that other person, through his or her image. A visibility is at stake here, playing between visibility and invisibility, shadow and light, the fact that you are there making claims but at the same time such a claim spills over onto the body of someone else who is absent. All these layers of visibility and invisibility made this struggle more radical and disruptive than other struggles.

When the families, together with the collective, demanded something of the Italian or the Tunisian government, the answer was usually: “this is not the right moment”. There was a spatial context in which migrations were not visible and in which also the death and the disappearance of the people could not become visible—hence the answer “this is not the right moment”. There was not even room for asking for political accountability for those deaths and disappearances. Not only was there no space for that, there was also no time, it was contended. Instead, the families’ struggle reversed this, taking over and appropriating both space and time. But this was not the space of politics, as it is usually conceived of. Rather, they took their own space and time, careless of the usual space and time of politics. They succeeded in that due to their “obsession”—the obsession that grows from the fact that if you are a mother, and you know that your son left and you don’t have any news from him after his departure ... such an obsession to want to know what happened to your son inevitably emerges. However, due to the revolutionary possibilities opened up in Tunisia at that time—possibilities that these families were able to seize—the struggle of Tunisian families became something different from that of other groups of mothers or families of missing migrants in Africa or elsewhere. In fact, Tunisian families enacted such an obsession that they were able to tell this in the public space in a way that was completely dissonant with regards to the politics of the public space as we are used to conceiving of it. Their ways to stay in the streets was quite unusual, also for us.

For instance, at the sit-in we did in 2012 in front of the Tunisian embassy in Rome, we went there with radical political groups that we thought could be on our same political line, but they were not able, these groups, to produce any effect, to disrupt anything. Instead, when one of the mothers started screaming, this immediately muddled both our way of acting and that of the police officers. The street had been taken by their hysteria and their screams that would usually be dismissed as out of place with regards to the usual ways of doing politics. The mothers appeared in fact as subjects out of place, since someone who stays in the street showing the image of someone else does not stay in her own place. This is why they troubled the political scene. The mothers of missing migrants are concerned with troubling of the political space as such.

I don’t think that it is correct to say that this struggle took over the right to citizenship. It was not interested in taking rights, nor in citizenship per se; it’s a struggle that simply took its own space, enacting another space and another time in contrast with the space and time of traditional politics. Indeed, they were never granted rights, neither by the revolutionary people nor by the conservative ones. I find it quite astonishing that the Tunisian youth who

made the revolution (and who then in part had also benefited from the political visibility of the revolution in Tunisia and in Europe) did not pay attention to the specific ways these families and mothers carried on their struggle. I think that this is because these mothers troubled everything, remaining in some way in the shadow, a shadow, however, that unsettles any light. And thus, differently from other struggles that started by being visible or having political visibility as their main goal, the mothers are still there, in struggle. In fact, they have not taken the space for themselves; this space is inevitably a space of obsession, of shadow and semi-shadow.

Let us get back to that scream you talk about, and think about those languages that are disqualified as being non-political: it is “noise” that remains completely unheard and thus produces exclusion. What does the experience of the families of missing migrants tell us about this fragile boundary between being disruptive and being unheard, being noisy and being excluded from political legitimacy?

Federica Sossi: I understand your point. Yet I don't believe that the mothers of the missing migrants could ever be listened to by someone, since in order to listen to them we should change the world, and make the articulation of their scream in a discourse possible. Their strength relies precisely on their capacity to unsettle the space, the time, and the discourse of politics. Indeed, they demand to have something back that actually is not there: ultimately they want back something that is past. In fact, the mothers say the truth of the past being there—the past existence—of those people, of those missing migrants. And this breaks up the very possibility of producing a discourse on that issue, both on the part of those who struggle against them.

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□ As part of bilateral agreements with European countries, Tunisia had been performing border checks along its coast to prevent out-migration to Europe.

ii

□ Tunisian citizens are fingerprinted upon the issuing of their ID card, and migrants are fingerprinted as they are caught crossing into Italy without papers and/or as they are arrested on Italian territory.

iii

□ The struggle of the families of missing Tunisian migrants is documented in Sossi (2013a, 2013b).

iv

□ This expression comes from the Arabic word حرافة (ḥarrāga, ḥarrāg) and translates as “those who burn”. It is used in refer to North African migrants that burn their papers to avoid identification as well as to their symbolic burning of frontiers as they cross the Mediterranean into Europe.

v

□ See <http://leventicinqueundici.noblogs.org/> (last accessed 10 August 2016).