ISULA MESTIZA

“To survive the Borderlands

You must live sin fronteras

be a crossroad.”

(Gloria Anzaldua, 1987)

*“**Isula mestiza**” brings together the Sicilian isula/isola (“island”) with the concept of mestizaje developed by Gloria Anzaldúa — understood as a condition of “mixture,” of being shaped at once by plural elements of identity, gender, languages, and cultures — and evokes Sicily as a borderland along the Central Mediterranean route. An island that, in the face of a Europe imposing ever more racist and repressive border policies, forcefully asserts its* mestiza *and migrant soul — by choice, by history, by geography, and by culture. As a socio-legal support and listening space, we have chosen this name to highlight the human relationships that take shape in our space, beginning in Ballarò, a neighborhood in the beating heart of Palermo, giving prominence to the movements, to the daily acts of freedom and* ordinary resistance*, carried forward by the people — with infinitely plural gazes — who pass through it.*

Don’t call them repatriation centers – a history of the facilitation of torture

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It is another Wednesday afternoon at Piazza Casa Professa, and Mr. Moatez arrives at our help desk for the first time. He speaks fluent Italian, with an accent that immediately reveals a keen ear and years spent living in Italy. He is looking for a place to sleep in Palermo for a few weeks. He has a small budget, but no documents. He was discharged from the hospital yesterday, where he had been admitted for emergency care. His medical records indicate that he has been living with chronic health conditions for several years. His condition suddenly worsened following fifteen days of imprisonment. Because no, we shall not call it “detention”, what is actually an imprisonment in a Repatriation Holding Center (CPR in Italian).

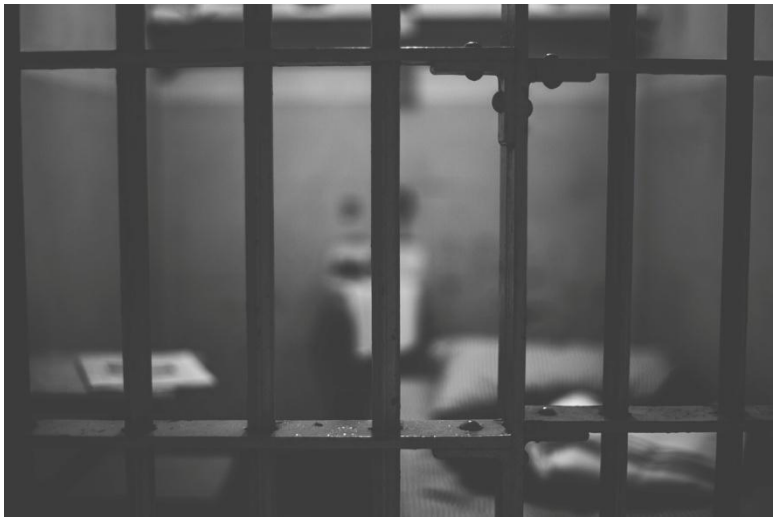
Detention centers for People on the Move

Some have argued that acronyms are used to conceal the truth, so let us call these places what they actually are. They are not centers from which repatriations are carried out, given that, fortunately, very few repatriation agreements are currently in place, but rather facilities where foreign nationals are held solely for administrative offenses. There are currently ten detention centers for foreigners active in Italy: Milan, Turin, Gradisca d'Isonzo (Gorizia), Ponte Galeria (Rome), Palazzo San Gervasio (Potenza), Macomer (Nuoro), Brindisi-Restinco, Bari-Palese, Trapani-Milo, and Caltanissetta-Pian del Lago. Although they are not always operational due to protests or pest infestations and rarely reach full capacity, these centers play an essential role in structuring state racism.

Legislative Decree 286/1998, the well-known Consolidated Act on Immigration, describes them as facilities where foreign nationals who have been issued an administrative expulsion or rejection order may be held pending repatriation. Behind this phrasing lies the moral premise that it is acceptable to punish foreign nationals who have run into an administrative issue by subjecting them to a regime that, in terms of the torture inflicted, surpasses even what is already "graciously" offered within our own penal institutions.

Inside

These centers are part of a private detention system controlled by a handful of operators, selected through "lowest-bidder" public tenders[1]. Yet, even if these operators were to provide all the meager, pathetic services required by law, these detention centers for foreigners would remain the Italian equivalent of Israeli administrative prisons or Libyan detention centers: places of confinement for people targeted on a racial basis, held under conditions that experts have not hesitated to define as torture, lacking access to legal defense and subjected to massive doses of psychotropic drugs, which, given the unlivable environment, become all but necessary. Detention centers for foreigners are pathogenic environments by explicit design, not as a result of errors or inefficiencies on the part of the public or private entities managing them.



[1] For major information: https://www.ibs.it/gorgo-cpr-tra-vite-perdute-libro-lorenzo-figoni-luca-rondi/e/9788865165508?srsltid=AU7gw4WS0RJNF4HQnFzHSGQ9yhovLWUirkwl6wHNS2JGUeYXTQNox6mX

By their very structure, they cause an immediate deterioration in the physical and mental well-being of those held within. Beyond the invisible yet brutal violence inherent to the institution itself, detainees face harassment by security personnel and torture at the hands of Italian police. These abuses have been documented over the years by former detainees and activists, and are now the subject of legal proceedings.

Detention in these centers can last up to 18 months, yet the exact duration remains unknown. Unlike some penitentiary institutions, which at least nominally include "rehabilitative" or "treatment-oriented" activities, detention here is laid bare in its rawest form: days spent in anti-suicide cells, with no access to fresh air, physical exercise, or kitchen facilities. Detainees are severed from their loved ones, from nature, and from the daily activities that give life meaning and pleasure. They are confined to an unhealthy environment, frequently plagued by infestations and disease outbreaks, under a regime of isolation structured along racial lines. Even the few, arbitrary "safeguards" that exist in prisons such as phone calls home, the receipt of packages, or meetings with support staff function here merely as a system of conditional concessions and threats; they do nothing to fill the profound void of detention in these centers.

Life in a restricted community

To authorize detention in these facilities, the government requires medical staff to assess an individual's fitness for "life in a restricted community." Through this euphemism, Italian doctors are tasked with sanctioning the institutionalized torture of healthy bodies and minds. As it stands, the primary criterion for being deemed "unfit" for such detention is the presence of a severe, acute medical condition. Psychiatric conditions are rarely included in the assessment, even if our experience at the support center shows us just how uncommon it is to encounter someone in an irregular situation who does not suffer from psychological distress. This distress is often deeply rooted in specific experiences of racism and marginalization.

According to a 2024 report by the "Tavolo Asilo" (Asylum Roundtable), the most recent year for which data is available, nearly 6,000 people were held in Italian CPRs (detention centers for foreigners). Among them, 40 percent were asylum seekers. Some, though not all, had received a removal order based on an alleged "social danger." Today, with the entry into force of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, additional scenarios now expose asylum seekers to the risk of arrest and transfer to a detention center. These include failing to comply with obligations to cooperate with authorities during the assessment of an international protection claim, a process about which individuals are often never even notified, or violating a mandatory residency requirement, ironically termed "authorization to reside".

Furthermore, 20 percent of those detained in 2024 were former inmates who, upon their release from Italian prisons, were forcibly transferred to these centers. These are individuals who received no legal assistance while incarcerated and, consequently, had no opportunity to pursue a path toward legal status. Upon their release, they find themselves without a residence permit. This situation is entirely attributable to the functioning of the penal system. Our project, "From the Sea to Prison" ("Dal mare al carcere"), works, among other things, to build a network connecting incarcerated

individuals with legal counsel, in order to provide support during the release process and prevent their transfer to a CPR.[2]

For years, former inmates and activists have denounced the abhorrent living conditions to which the foreign population is subjected. The “Tavolo Asilo” has also recently acknowledged that these conditions resemble those found within detention units subject to the special 41-bis regime. This is a sobering reminder that such forms of torture may be far more familiar to us than we would dare to admit.

“Desaparecidos” (The Disappeared)

Disappearances within CPRs are increasingly documented by activists and researchers working on the issue and have become a reality of life in Italy for racialized individuals and those who stand in solidarity with them. The risk of arrest and detention is often carried out without notification and has become a part of our daily lives, giving rise to networks of family members and loved ones searching for those who have gone missing.[3] A network of former detainees and activists springs into action whenever someone seeks a relative or friend who has not been heard from for a few days. Sometimes, it is lawyers or social workers who raise the alarm when an individual at risk of arrest and deportation fails to show up for an appointment. A chain of communication begins between those on the inside and those on the outside, with everyone scanning the faces and names of new arrivals, hoping, all the while, never to find anyone they know.

Fitness for State-Sanctioned Torture

Like so many others, Mr. Moatez was arrested by police during a routine check. The attending physicians quickly declared him "fit" for detention. In his case, two chronic medical conditions worsened in just 15 days, leading to his hospitalization and a new medical report. This document, written in broken Italian that betrays deep exhaustion and strain, makes it clear that Mr. Moatez was on the verge of death inside that CPR.

One cannot help but wonder: what exactly do the doctors know when they sign off on the "fitness" of individuals for detention in a CPR? Perhaps these gentle terms such as “detention” or “life in a restricted community” succeed in their cosmetic intent to muddy the waters. After all, there is little real difference between a “reception center” and a “detention center.”

Conscientious objection

Yet, serious accusations have been leveled against professionals who have spent years defending the rights of those deprived of their liberty. The immediate consequence has been to force these individuals, now occupied with preparing their own defense, to lose precious time, while simultaneously sending a chilling message to all healthcare personnel.

We stand with the medical professionals who resist the pressure of racist institutions and continue to work toward ensuring care and attention for everyone.

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[2] To learn more about it: https://dal-mare-al-carcere.info/

[3] For more information: https://altreconomia.it/che-cosa-succede-quando-una-persona-muore-o-scompare-in-frontiera-lesperienza-di-mem-med/

Translated from Italian by Alexa Vittur

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