Migration, Water, and the Human Condition in Laurent Gaudé's *Eldorado*

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Abstract: In *Eldorado*, Laurent Gaudé transforms the Mediterranean into a space where personal desire and collective crisis intersect. Through Soleiman, a young African migrant pursuing dignity, and Salvatore Piracci, an Italian coast guard consumed by moral doubt, the novel portrays migration as both human struggle and political dilemma. Rejecting abstraction, Gaudé foregrounds the voices, silences, and bodies of those in motion, exposing the violence of borders and the fragility of resilience. This article, drawing on postcolonial theory and migration studies, argues that *Eldorado* compels us to confront the ethical stakes of displacement while restoring humanity to its narratives.

Keywords: Migration, symbolism of the sea, ethical crisis, narrative polyphony, border and identity, trauma representation, human agency

Introduction

In her insightful article *Speculations on the Mediterranean Borderscape: Le Baiser de Lampedusa*, Silvia Ruzzi explores how literature can capture the shifting meaning of borders in our time. Through a close reading of Mounir Charfi's novel *Le Baiser de Lampedusa*, she reveals how the Mediterranean—once a space of fluidity, connection, and cultural exchange—has been transformed into a zone of division, surveillance, and exclusion. Ruzzi's analysis shows how this transformation is not just geographic or political, but deeply symbolic, and how literature plays a crucial role in reflecting and challenging the narratives that shape contemporary migration policies.

Seen through this lens, the Mediterranean emerges as one of the most charged and symbolic frontiers of our time. No longer just a geographic line, it represents a threshold—a line between the Global South and North, between hope and despair, between life and death. In *Eldorado*, Laurent Gaudé situates this liminal space (Turner 18) at the heart of his narrative, weaving together the parallel journeys of Soleiman, a young African migrant fleeing war, and Salvatore Piracci, an Italian coast guard captain grappling with the moral weight of his duty. Through their intersecting paths, Gaudé transforms the sea from mere backdrop into an active, ambiguous force: a space of fragile dreams and devastating loss.

In *Eldorado*, water becomes a powerful metaphor—carrying the paradoxes of migration. For Soleiman and countless others, the sea is both a passage toward dignity and a perilous void where lives vanish. His description, "la mer était sauvage" [The sea was rough] (72), reflects not only the sea's danger but its indifference. Later, he evokes it as "une baleine immense [...] sans pensée sans volonté" [A gigantic whale […] without thought or will] (73)—an almost sentient monstrosity, vast and thoughtless. Gaudé thus gives form to a sea that is not neutral, but complicit—a silent accomplice in the dehumanizing forces that strip migrants of control and identity.

This duality echoes the sobering reality captured by Boschet and Guégan: "l'Europe est ainsi la région du monde où l'on meurt le plus en tentant de franchir une frontière illégalement" [Europe is thus the region of the world where the most people die while trying to cross a border illegally] (74).

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 48, No. 3, Autumn 2025 [65-73]

Europe, here, is no longer a promised land—it becomes a space of rejection and death. The Mediterranean is transformed into a global epicenter of migratory tragedy, saturated with the structural violence of contemporary border regimes. Gaudé's use of water as metaphor resonates far beyond *Eldorado*. In the wider African and diasporic literary tradition, oceans often carry the burden of trauma, memory, and historical rupture.

In Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, the Atlantic is a devouring entity— "un ventre glouton" [Gluttonous belly] — consuming not just lives, but the very dreams of Senegalese youth lured by European illusions. Diome's image— "Les insulaires s'accrochaient toujours aux gencives de l'Atlantique" [The islanders always clung to the gums of the Atlantic] (265) — depicts a grotesque, cannibalistic sea gnawing at hope itself.

In Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, water takes on yet another tragic dimension. "L'eau a emporté nos fils et nos noms" [The water carried away our sons and our names] (133), she writes, capturing how the Atlantic erases not just bodies, but lineages and identities. Miano inscribes the ocean with grief—ancestral, cultural, and historical. It becomes both a witness and a grave, a watery archive of the transatlantic slave trade's ruptures. In her poetics, water carries absence—those unspoken names and untold stories submerged by history's tides. Like Gaudé's Mediterranean, Miano's Atlantic is riddled with paradox: it binds while it severs, carries life while concealing death. Through this poetics of water, Miano restores submerged memories and confronts the silence of history, showing how oceans are not empty spaces, but haunted geographies where pain, resistance, and legacy echo.

Across these narratives, water is more than scenery—it is the medium through which displacement, survival, and annihilation are narrated. Whether Mediterranean or Atlantic, these bodies of water carry the emotional and political weight of forced migration. They are transit zones and trauma zones—spaces where colonial legacies and neocolonial injustices collide.

This article argues that Gaudé mobilizes water as a deeply layered symbol, reflecting not just the dangers of Mediterranean crossings but also the psychic and moral fractures such journeys leave behind. Drawing from postcolonial theory, migration literature, and current debates on borders and belonging, this study explores how *Eldorado* navigates the ethical, symbolic, and existential stakes of forced migration. It begins by examining the Mediterranean as the novel's central axis—where destinies are made and lost, and where Europe's border contradictions are rendered most visible.

I. The Mediterranean as a Space of Transit and Trauma

In *We, the People of Europe?*, Étienne Balibar challenges us to rethink borders—not as static lines on a map, but as invisible forces shaping daily life. "The borders of Europe," he writes, "are no longer simply at the periphery [...] but are dispersed across the social body" (Balibar 109). This idea unsettles the notion of arrival, suggesting that for many migrants, crossing into Europe doesn't mark the end of a journey but the beginning of a more insidious form of exclusion. Borders are no longer just checkpoints; they seep into train stations, schools, hospitals—quietly deciding who is seen, who is safe, who belongs.

Nowhere is this fragmentation more palpable than in the Mediterranean—a sea once praised as a cradle of civilization, now haunted by absence. In contemporary migration narratives, it is no longer a route but a rupture. A stretch of water heavy with contradictions: between hope and despair, movement and erasure. In Laurent Gaudé's *Eldorado*, the Mediterranean is more than a geographical barrier—it is a space charged with emotion, with the ache of leaving and the fear of never arriving. It holds within it the weight of longing, of stories untold, and of dreams carried across in fragile boats.

For Soleiman, the young migrant whose story we follow, the sea appears as "une promesse" (52) - a promise—but one that slips through his fingers. "La mer était calme" [The sea was calm] Gaudé

writes, "les hommes [...] reprirent courage. Ils partaient enfin. La vie allait enfin commencer" [The men, [...] regained courage. They were finally leaving. Life was finally about to begin] (25). There's quiet power in this moment—a heartbeat of hope before the plunge into uncertainty. It is not just about reaching a destination; it is about stepping into the unknown with everything on the line. Crossing the Mediterranean becomes an act of faith, a desperate wager on the possibility of a future.

And yet, the same water that offers escape also takes. The Mediterranean becomes a graveyard—silent, but not empty. A place where the line between life and death blurs. Gaudé does not let us look away. "La panique s'empara très vite du bateau [...] tout était devenu lent et cruel" [Panic quickly took hold of the boat [...] everything had become slow and cruel] (26), he writes, capturing not just chaos, but the slow, painful unraveling of hope. Through Soleiman's eyes, we feel the cold edge of fear, the unbearable waiting, the uncertainty that clings like salt to the skin. The sea is no longer just a passage—it is a reckoning.

Gaudé gives this ocean a voice, one that whispers of absence. It watches silently as bodies vanish, and names are lost. Salvatore Piracci, the coast guard officer tasked with pulling corpses from the water, carries this silence in his soul. What begins as duty becomes torment. He is not immune to the moral weight of his work. The sea has not only swallowed the drowned—it has consumed his certainty, leaving him adrift in his own ethical fog.

Through both Soleiman and Piracci, the Mediterranean becomes more than a setting. It becomes a character—a ghostly witness to suffering, a border that wounds as much as it divides. Migrants crossing it do not just leave places behind; they leave parts of themselves. "Nous allons laisser derrière nous la tombe de nos ancêtres [...] là où nous irons, nous ne serons rien. Des pauvres. Sans histoire. Sans argent" [We are going to leave behind us the graves of our ancestors... where we are going, we will be nothing. Just poor. Without History. Without money](46), Soleiman says. His words are not only about exile—they are about erasure. To cross the Mediterranean is not just to risk death; it is to risk becoming invisible.

This erasure is never just accidental—it is built into the system. Gaudé places us on the beaches of Lampedusa, where drowned bodies wash ashore among vacationers: "Ceux noyés par les flots [...] s'échouent [...] au milieu des vacanciers" [Those drowned by the waves [...] wash ashore [...] amidst the vacationers] (21). The juxtaposition is unbearable. It exposes a brutal truth: some lives are mourned, others are forgotten. In this moment, the sea becomes an archive—not of names, but of absences.

This is what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics: the power of the state not only to let live but to decide who may die. The sea becomes a site of sovereign abandonment. Whether someone is rescued or left to drown is not a neutral decision—it is an exercise of power. Eldorado does not dramatize this; it simply lays it bare, letting the quiet cruelty of indifference speak for itself. And yet, against all evidence, the dream of Europe persists. Migrants in *Eldorado* cling to what Gaudé calls the desire to "caresser leur rêve d'Europe avec délices" [To fondly cherish their dream of Europe] (204). It is a painful dream—seductive, persistent, hollow. Europe is imagined as freedom, reinvention, a place where life begins again. But Gaudé dismantles this myth piece by piece. Europe becomes not a haven but a *forteresse assiégée*—a besieged fortress, in Balibar's words—its walls high, its gates closed, its systems built to exclude.

Piracci embodies this contradiction. His breakdown is not dramatic—it is slow, unspoken, internal. Through him, Gaudé shows us how the violence of the border does not stop at the shoreline. It moves inward, unraveling even those charged with defending it. In Piracci's gaze, we see the human cost of complicity. He is not a villain. He is a man undone by the system he once served.

Why do people still risk everything to cross? Everett S. Lee's push-pull theory offers one explanation: people are pushed by war, poverty, hopelessness, and pulled by dreams of dignity, work, safety. But these dreams, too, are fragile. Soleiman's words— "si nous passons de l'autre côté, nous sommes sauvés [...] un petit pied pour connaître la liberté" [If we make it to the other side, we are saved [...] one small foot to know freedom] (189) —sound almost childlike in their hope. And yet they cut deep.

They expose how migration is not only driven by need, but by myth. Europe is imagined as salvation. What they find instead is bureaucracy, suspicion, and invisibility.

Here, Bourdieu's theory of capital helps us understand what follows. Migrants arrive with no economic capital, no cultural capital, and no social capital. They lack the tools to belong in a world structured against them. As Bourdieu reminds us, "The social world is accumulated history" (241)—and migrants are often denied access to that history, to its codes, its advantages, its networks. Their marginalization is not accidental; it is systemic. In *Eldorado*, the Mediterranean becomes a liminal abyss. A place where people are not only in transit but in suspension—between who they were and who they might become, between life and nonexistence. The journey through this space is not only a physical crossing. It is an existential passage—a dismantling of identity, a leap into the unknown.

In the end, Gaudé does not give us resolution. He gives us the ache of it all: the myth of Europe, the violence of borders, the deep and unspoken costs of movement. He gives us the Mediterranean not as a sea, but as a wound—open, salted, endless.

II. Salvatore Piracci and the Ethical Crisis of Border Enforcement

Salvatore Piracci's ethical awakening marks a profoundly human rupture—a moment of painful lucidity in which he begins to perceive the suffering inscribed within the very machinery he once upheld. As a seasoned coast guard officer patrolling the Mediterranean, Piracci initially adheres to the logic of duty, carrying out state mandates under the guise of neutrality. Yet over time, the weight of unburied corpses, the mute agony of survivors, and the haunting repetition of these encounters corrode his sense of detachment. His eventual decision to abandon his official post and seek a redemptive path by aiding those he once intercepted is thus not merely an act of rebellion, but a deeply personal reckoning with complicity.

Laurent Gaudé, however, resists romanticizing this transformation. Piracci is not depicted as a redeemer, nor is his gesture offered as a solution. His ethical rupture, while emotionally resonant, is politically marginal. It cannot halt the bureaucratic violence of Europe's fortified borders, nor does it dismantle the securitized apparatus that criminalizes movement and condemns countless lives to erasure. It is an individual rupture within a collective structure of violence—meaningful, but insufficient.

This ambivalence resonates sharply with Didier Fassin's critique of contemporary humanitarianism. In *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Fassin argues that the moral imperative to alleviate suffering often supplants the need for political justice. "What humanitarian government imposes," he writes, "in the name of moral duty, is a reduction of politics to ethics" (Fassin 269). Piracci's response to the suffering he witnesses—however sincere—is not grounded in collective resistance or structural critique, but in personal guilt and affective identification. In this way, his ethical awakening risks reinforcing the system it seeks to oppose, recasting systemic injustice as an individual moral dilemma rather than a site of political struggle.

Gaudé's novel thereby stages the ethical paradox Fassin identifies: the desire to act compassionately in a world where political transformation has been displaced by moral sentiment. Piracci's journey is not dismissed—but it is troubled. He becomes emblematic of a broader dilemma faced by those who witness suffering yet remain enmeshed in the structures that produce it. The novel challenges readers to grapple with a double truth: that human empathy is essential, but also fundamentally inadequate when severed from structural critique and collective action. By structuring *Eldorado* as a dual narrative—juxtaposing Piracci's slow unraveling with Soleiman's harrowing odyssey across borders—Gaudé makes visible the entangled consequences of Europe's migration regimes. Soleiman's trajectory traces the physical, emotional, and symbolic violence experienced by the displaced; Piracci's story, in turn, reveals how such violence reverberates inward, fracturing the very agents tasked with its enforcement. Together, their narratives suggest that the crisis of migration is not merely external or peripheral to Europe—it is internalized, woven into the ethical and institutional fabric of the continent itself.

The Mediterranean Sea—often portrayed in media as either a tranquil tourist backdrop or a chaotic site of rescue—takes on a far more charged symbolism in *Eldorado*. For Piracci, long accustomed to reading the sea as a cartographic zone of patrol and control, it becomes something else: a site of reckoning, where the currents of law, duty, and silence collide with unbearable truths. The turning point arrives in a quiet confrontation with a woman he once "rescued"—a woman who has returned, not to thank him, but to accuse him of complicity. Her words are not angry, but clear-eyed and devastating, rupturing the shield of professional distance Piracci had built over decades. In that moment, the sea becomes a mirror, reflecting back the ethical cost of his work—not as abstract policy, but as lived violence.

Gaudé thus constructs the Mediterranean as both a physical frontier and a moral threshold—a space where the politics of security reveal their human toll. Piracci's disintegration is slow and interior, marked not by spectacle but by silence, insomnia, and doubt. His eventual decision to walk away from his post is not framed as heroic resistance but as a deeply human act: the quiet, faltering step of a man who can no longer bear the weight of sanctioned indifference. His inland drift, away from the sea, suggests not redemption, but the beginning of an unsettled search for meaning—an attempt to live with, rather than escape from, what he has seen.

At first, Piracci appears as the embodiment of state authority—a disciplined enforcer of maritime law in a region increasingly saturated with fear and geopolitics. To the migrants he intercepts, he is simply "la muraille de l'Europe" [The wall of Europe] (67) and "le mauvais œil qui traque les désespérés" [The evil eye that haunts the desperate] (67), the faceless agent of a system designed to block, contain, and return. But Gaudé quickly peels back this uniformed exterior. Beneath it lies a man eroded by doubt. When Piracci muses that, "les hommes, sur le dos bombé de la mer, ne sont rien" [Men, on the arched back of the sea, are nothing] (71), it is not a declaration of indifference, but a recognition of the systemic dehumanization he has come to embody. The pivotal rupture in Piracci's narrative occurs when he is confronted by the very woman he once 'saved.' Her accusation pierces the veneer of humanitarian duty, revealing the deep ethical dissonance between the act of rescue and the system of exclusion it ultimately serves. In that moment, the moral ambiguity of his role becomes inescapably personal. Her voice echoes Didier Fassin's critique of "humanitarian reason," where compassion functions less as genuine care than as a moral justification for coercion. As Fassin writes, "Humanitarianism is a language that emerges in particular historical moments to influence the ways in which politicians, the media, NGOs, and institutions speak about violence and inequality" (3). Piracci's desertion—his symbolic reenactment of the migrant's path—thus becomes a response not just to personal guilt, but to the hollow moral architecture of the system he once served.

Yet this inversion—where the European subject seeks self-knowledge through marginalization—raises urgent questions about narrative focus and voice. Edward Said's *Orientalism* reminds us that, Western narratives often re-center themselves by rendering the non-Western Other as backdrop or allegory. In *Eldorado*, despite Soleiman's poignant testimony, it is Piracci's ethical turmoil that dominates the narrative structure. Soleiman, one among "ces embarcations de misère et stupeur" [Those vessels of misery and bewilderment] (119), often appears as part of an anonymous tide of human suffering: "Ces hommes dont ils ne savaient rien, ni le nom, ni le pays, ni l'histoire, venaient s'échouer chez eux et leur cadavre ne pourrait jamais être rendu à leur mère" [These men, of whom they knew nothing—neither their names, nor their country, nor their story—came to wash up on their shores, and their bodies could never be returned to their mothers] (119). Even in death, the migrant is denied visibility, mourning, and subjecthood.

Frantz Fanon, in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, warns of this tendency to humanize the colonizer while rendering the colonized as voiceless, spectral, or doomed (Fanon 18). Migrants in *Eldorado* are often caught in a permanent state of motion "Ceux qui marchent, avec rage, vers d'autres terres. Ailleurs. Toujours ailleurs" [Those who walk, with rage, toward other lands. Elsewhere. Always elsewhere] (147), a formulation that emphasizes endurance but flattens individuality. Their journey becomes metaphorical, their presence a symbol more than a lived reality.

In addition, Gayatri Spivak's seminal question— "*Can the subaltern speak?"*—resonates here. Spivak cautions against narratives that speak *for* the marginalized, even with the best intentions, thus reinscribing hierarchy (Spivak 294). Piracci's awakening is emotionally affecting, but it becomes the lens through which migrant suffering is made legible. Soleiman's voice — "nous étions là, patients et résignés, souffle contre souffle, les coudes des uns dans les côtes des autres, les genoux serrés sur le corps. Chacun de ceux qui m'entourent va à son destin" [We were there, patient and resigned, breath against breath, elbows pressed into each other's ribs, knees clenched against bodies. Each of those around me was heading toward their own fate] (128) — offers moments of lyrical depth, yet these are ultimately subsumed within Piracci's moral journey.

Michel Foucault's analysis of diffuse power in *Surveiller et punir* underscores this dynamic: "le pouvoir s'exerce sans partage, selon une figure hiérarchique continue" [Power is exercised without sharing, according to a continuous hierarchical structure] (230). Piracci's rebellion, though symbolically significant, leaves the broader architecture of border enforcement untouched. His crisis reveals the brutality of the system but does not dismantle it.

Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* provides further clarity: migrants are reduced to *bare life*, bodies outside the law, vulnerable to violence without recourse. The Mediterranean, in *Eldorado*, becomes a *zone d'exception*, echoing Achille Mbembe's notion of *necropolitics*, where sovereign power is enacted through abandonment and death (Mbembe 11).

Despite its profound critique, *Eldorado* risks reproducing the very asymmetry it condemns. Piracci's conscience becomes the narrative center, relegating migrant subjectivity to the periphery. As Fanon argues, the colonial gaze survives not only in silence but in appropriation—when suffering becomes a backdrop for European self-realization. Yet Gaudé does not end there. In the novel's final movements, he begins to shift focus. Soleiman emerges not as an emblem of pity, but as a voice of resilience, agency, and ethical clarity. The sea, once a space of erasure, becomes a liminal site of rebirth and testimony. In this way, *Eldorado* gestures—cautiously but meaningfully—toward a rebalancing of narrative power. It calls on readers not merely to witness suffering, but to listen differently. Migrant voices, no longer distant or abstract, demand recognition—not only as victims of a broken system, but as subjects of memory, justice, and transformation.

III. Migration, Transformation, and Humanitarian Reform

In the final section of *Eldorado*, Laurent Gaudé turns to the motif of water—especially the Mediterranean Sea—as a powerful, multilayered symbol of both suffering and transformation. For migrants like Soleiman, the sea speaks not with promise but with cruelty: "la mer va et vient sur la grève, avec un murmure lancinant – comme pour narguer les vaincus que nous sommes" [The sea comes and goes on the shore, with a haunting murmur – as if to taunt the vanquished that we are] (130). This haunting image captures the heart of the migrant condition: crossing borders is never just a matter of movement—it is a passage through erasure and reinvention, through loss and the hope of renewal.

Through this symbolic framework, Gaudé offers a searing critique of Europe's contemporary migration regimes. The Mediterranean becomes a watery graveyard where policy decides who may live and who must die—a chilling reality that echoes Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, where sovereignty is asserted through the power to decide over life and death. In fact, Mbembe writes: "The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die (11). This harsh logic unfolds through the intertwined journeys of Soleiman and Salvatore Piracci. Piracci, a former coast guard officer, undergoes a profound moral unravelling as he reckons with his complicity in a system that polices borders at the cost of human lives. Gaudé portrays his breakdown with poignant clarity: "Il pensa à tous ces cas où les corps abandonnent prématurément l'esprit [...] Mais l'esprit était sec [...] la vie s'était simplement retirée de lui" [He thought of all those cases where the body gives up on the mind too soon [...] But the mind was dry – life had simply withdrawn from it] (211). Piracci's spiritual

exhaustion reveals the toll such systems inflict not only on those they exclude, but also on those they enlist to enforce them.

Piracci's transformation further illuminates how securitized border regimes dehumanize everyone they touch. Though not a policymaker, he becomes what Karl Marx would call an alienated worker—estranged from the human impact of his labor. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx describes alienation as the loss of connection between the worker and their product, process, and humanity itself (Marx 74). Piracci, through his growing moral anguish, begins to perceive the machinery of which he is a part. His awakening marks a flicker of class consciousness, a moment of ethical lucidity. But Gaudé does not romanticize this realization. Individual remorse, he suggests, cannot undo systemic violence. Piracci's redemption, while personally meaningful, is powerless against the broader machinery of exclusion.

In this light, *Eldorado* is read as a structural critique, echoing Marx's claim that true emancipation demands a radical transformation of material and social conditions (Marx 85). Piracci's alienation is not simply emotional—it is symptomatic of a global order that places state sovereignty and capitalist logic above human life. The novel reframes migration not just as a humanitarian emergency but as a product of entrenched global inequalities and postcolonial dispossession. Piracci, once an agent of control, becomes one of its casualties. Migrants like Soleiman, meanwhile, are twice displaced: first by the collapse of their homelands, then by Europe's refusal to receive them. In this context, the Mediterranean is no longer a natural feature—it becomes a site of abandonment, a watery archive of injustice. Gaudé captures this with devastating force : "il se souvenait de ces années où il n'avait vu que des visages fermés par la meurtrissure de l'échec. Il était maintenant de l'autre côté" [He remembered those years when he had seen only faces closed off by the wounds of failure. Now, he was on the other side] (232). Migration, here, is a shared trauma—etched into the silence of the sea and the memory of those who survive.

Yet *Eldorado* also raises urgent questions about representation. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's seminal question— "Can the Subaltern Speak?" — we must ask: whose voice is truly heard in Gaudé's novel? Though he seeks to humanize migrants, their perspectives are often filtered through Piracci, a white European figure embedded in structures of power (Spivak 287). This narrative lens risks reinforcing the very marginalization it aims to expose. Migrants are not only denied legal and territorial access—they are also, at times, discursively silenced, reduced to abstract symbols of crisis rather than presented as subjects with agency and voice. Even Piracci's moral journey remains situated within a representational economy that centers his inner turmoil over the realities of those he encounters. Thus, exclusion operates not only at the borders of nations but at the borders of narrative itself.

Still, despite these tensions, *Eldorado* gestures toward a possible ethical reorientation. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*, which advocates for literature as a means of cultivating moral imagination, Gaudé's novel calls on readers to feel with—and not just for—those caught in the machinery of migration (Nussbaum 5). The novel's final exhortation— "il leur dit de partir, sans attendre, à l'assaut des frontières. De tenter leur chance avec rage et obstination" [He told them to set out without delay, to storm the borders. To try their luck with rage and determination] (237) — resounds not as triumph, but as a quiet, defiant affirmation of the human will to survive. Migration, *Eldorado* reminds us, is not driven by opportunism but by the irrepressible pursuit of dignity, safety, and belonging. In that final gesture, Gaudé moves beyond critique, offering a vision—however fragile—of reform grounded not in pity, but in solidarity, justice, and shared vulnerability.

Conclusion: Migration, Ethics, and the Poetics of the Border

In *Eldorado*, Laurent Gaudé composes a hauntingly polyphonic narrative that traces intertwined journeys of survival, disillusionment, and transformation. Through this intricate weaving of voices and destinies, he offers a powerful critique of the ethical and political frameworks that shape con-

temporary migration. The Mediterranean, ever-present throughout the novel, becomes far more than a geographical boundary—it emerges as a symbolic and emotional landscape, a layered space where colonial histories, postcolonial ruptures, and global inequalities collide. At once a site of hope and despair, departure and rebirth, it captures the complex ambivalence at the heart of the migratory experience. In this watery metaphor, Gaudé confronts us with the paradox of exile: the sea that divides is also the sea that connects; what drowns may also deliver.

Water, then, functions not only as a narrative thread but as a philosophical medium—a fluid space through which migration is reframed not merely as economic necessity or political escape, but as a bodily and existential ordeal. The journey, as portrayed in *Eldorado*, becomes a kind of passage—a stripping away of certainties, a confrontation with loss, and a movement toward new, if uncertain, ways of being. This is most powerfully embodied in the figure of Salvatore Piracci, a naval officer whose gradual unraveling reflects the emotional and ethical toll of enforcing borders. His descent into moral crisis exposes the human cost of the necropolitical order (Mbembe 11). However, Mbembe's more recent work, *La communauté terrestre*, challenges us to move beyond this logic of death, urging instead a shared planetary ethics rooted in care, relationality, and collective life (27). Through Piracci's internal conflict, Gaudé exposes the fragile and often contested boundary between duty and conscience, law and justice—resonating with Mbembe's call for new modes of belonging and ethical engagement with our shared earthly existence.

Yet the novel's ethical framework is not without its tensions. By centering so much of the moral narrative on Piracci's redemptive arc—from complicity to resistance—*Eldorado* risks re-centering a European gaze, a critique anticipated by Gayatri Spivak in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" The migrant experience, though sympathetically rendered, often remains filtered through the lens of the "insider"—a figure grappling with guilt rather than fully relinquishing power. Despite Gaudé's efforts to humanize migrants, their voices are often mediated, their subjectivities shadowed by broader structures of epistemic inequality that continue to dominate global narratives on migration.

Nevertheless, *Eldorado* avoids simplistic moral binaries. Through the parallel, intersecting journeys of Soleiman and Piracci, Gaudé presents migration as a shared trauma—a wound that transcends borders, implicating not just those who flee but also those who enforce, ignore, or rationalize exclusion. In this sense, the novel becomes a call for ethical imagination, echoing Martha Nussbaum's vision of literature as a space for cultivating empathy, civic engagement, and a more expansive understanding of justice. It moves us beyond legalistic categories and toward a recognition of our shared vulnerability—a foundation for new solidarities grounded in compassion rather than fear.

Most importantly, *Eldorado* challenges us to rethink the very meaning of borders. No longer just lines on a map, they are revealed as liminal spaces where identities dissolve and reform, where the familiar categories of citizen and foreigner, legality and illegality, falter under the pressure of lived experience. Gaudé's poignant closing line— "il n'était pas de mer que l'homme ne puisse traverser" [There was no sea man could not cross] (237) — offers a poetic, if fragile, vision of human resilience. But this gesture of hope must be read with nuance: it is not a romantic denial of structural injustice, but a challenge to imagine new forms of hospitality, sovereignty, and belonging.

Ultimately, situating *Eldorado* within a broader postcolonial and transnational framework allows us to appreciate its deep relevance to the ethical, political, and existential dilemmas of our time. Gaudé does more than depict the violence of displacement—he compels us to reckon with its causes, its human cost, and our collective responsibility. In doing so, he affirms the power of literature not only to bear witness but to awaken moral insight, inviting us to see beyond borders, and to feel, even if briefly, the weight and dignity of lives in motion.

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