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TURNING POINTS: GUEST ESSAY

## *The Depths of Our Humanity*

A garden cemetery in Africa sensitizes us to the perils endured by migrants the world over.

By David Diop

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*This personal reflection is part of a series called [Turning Points](#), in which writers explore what critical moments from this year might mean for the year ahead. You can read more by visiting the [Turning Points series page](#).*

**Turning Point:** More than 1,400 migrants died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in 2021, according to estimates from researchers.

No one knows the precise number of Africans currently dying in anonymity while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Those who don't make it aren't generally represented in the statistics, but estimates, based on the tallies of people rescued by the coast guards of southern Europe and northern Africa, suggest that African migrants in the thousands — women, men and children — drown in that sea each year. And at the tail end of this chain of human despair are the people who bury these migrants, or their shredded remains, after the Mediterranean's cruel currents expel them onto their shores.

One such site is Zarzis in southeastern Tunisia, where last June Rachid Koraichi, an Algerian artist, [decided to build a cemetery](#), scented by jasmine blossoms and flowering orange trees, that he calls the Jardin d'Afrique, or Garden of Africa. I have not been to see this garden-cemetery, but I was struck by a beautiful description in the newspaper *Le Monde*, in which a reporter noted the presence of “yellow and green cups, meant to attract rainwater and birds,” set into the white graves. Mr. Koraichi offers this paradisiacal beauty to — in his words — those “[damned by the sea](#),” as compensation for the suffering they endure on the way to their deaths. The Garden is already nearly full to capacity, bearing witness to the scale of this horrific modern hecatomb.



The Algerian artist Rachid Koraichi at the cemetery for migrants he calls the Jardin d'Afrique, or Garden of Africa, in southeastern Tunisia. Credit...Fathi Nasri/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The global landscape is full of dangerous natural borders; the Rio Grande, which separates Mexico from the United States, takes several lives each year, for instance. But the central Mediterranean is the most deadly. According to the International Organization for Migration, approximately [20,000 Africans have](#)

[died or disappeared](#) in this sea since 2014, and that number does not take into account migrants from the Middle East and eastern Africa who disappear into the eastern Mediterranean off the coasts of Greece and Turkey.

Everyone believes they know why people from the Global South are drawn toward the Global North. We imagine these migrants choose to leave their homes because the south is uninhabitable, the south is intractable, the south is without pity for the impoverished. The north is no less so, but we imagine the migrants don't believe this. These men and women from Black Africa and the Maghreb, many of them young, risk their lives to undertake the passage to Europe, to sail across the central Mediterranean by way of Libya in order to stop merely enduring and begin living, and to provide a future for their families. The full journey can take many years.

I've always been struck by the familiar, recurring scenario in American disaster films that denotes an apocalypse: no more electricity, no more running water, no food security, no hospitals — the disappearance of all the things people like you and me enjoy without giving them a second thought. Yet this fictive evocation of the End of the World is lived out by half of humanity every day. For [billions of disadvantaged people](#), life is indeed a waking nightmare. To be able to eat, drink, bathe and clothe themselves is a daily battle.

The migrants who decide to flee the violence of this immiseration know there exists a world in which to live does not mean merely to survive. These are people who are both clear-eyed and blinded by hope, who see the north as the inverse of their own world: an attainable haven of peace and tranquillity, where the good life is within reach for anyone willing to work. While those swallowed by the Mediterranean may die without even having the chance to lose their illusions about the north, are the illusions of the survivors, who are being held in detention centers in southern Europe or North Africa, likely to remain intact?

Is it useful to ask who is to blame for this catastrophe? The political responsibilities can be shared between the north and the south and are intertwined in such a way that each side can present a solid argument relieving itself of blame: Hasn't the south long been a victim while its riches were exploited by the north? And hasn't the north, whether we like to say it or not, been responsible for pulling untold migrants from the sea, saving them from a watery death?



*Migrants awaited the Italian Guardia Costiera near the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa in August 2021. Credit...Juan Medina/Reuters*

There is a universal ethical rule — a “categorical imperative” — that an 18th century philosopher placed at the center of his foundational system of moral philosophy: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end.”

We owe this [imperative](#) to Immanuel Kant's pioneering “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.” All of those taking action to save the lives of migrants — not only in the Mediterranean but the world over — act in accordance with Kant's injunction, both in body and in spirit. They deserve not only our praise and our respect, but also substantial

international support. Regarding the case at hand, it is thanks to these individuals of good will, whether supported by nongovernmental organizations or the offices of the United Nations, that the Mediterranean might continue to pass as the cradle of European civilization, and not its grave.

Artists and thinkers like Rachid Koraichi are here to keep us awake. His cemetery is not only a consolation for the souls lost to the Mediterranean and the people close to them, it is also a work that expresses — better than a hundred speeches could — a grief that must be shared between north and south. Holding our hearts with its beauty, the Jardin d'Afrique sensitizes us to the conditions endured by migrants the world over, renewing our sense of shared humanity. Generosity and solidarity are not illusions: They exist within the societies of the north, as well as of the south.

The Jardin d'Afrique reminds us of the only thing preventing humanity itself from a collective shipwreck: the refusal to remain indifferent to the suffering of others.

David Diop is a French-Senegalese novelist and academic who received the 2021 International Booker Prize for his novel “At Night All Blood Is Black.”

This essay was translated from the French by Anna Moschovakis.