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Resonating identification photographs: longing for possibilities within and beyond the border regime's visual framing

Abstract

Unauthorised border crossings are probably the most mediatised of all illegal(ised) human activities. Images of people moving across the Mediterranean on boats or on foot have become iconic of how we have come to understand the social phenomenon of 'illegal migration' in Southern Europe. At the same time people who cross borders create specific relationships to the images that are produced of them by the states involved before, during and after the crossing. Identification photographs for passports and permits of stay become charged with particular "affective frequencies" (Campt 2017) in the context of unauthorised border crossings and legalisation. This paper examines the existential and affective relationship that Mohamed Khamis, a previously undocumented Egyptian migrant establishes with such governmentalised images of himself during the process of legalisation initiated by the 2012 amnesty in Italy. Collaborative filmmaking, animation and performance provide the ethnographic context through which our research has attempted to trace the "resonating frequencies" that are enclosed in the border regime's visual framings. This contribution contests for co-creative image making as an epistemological practice that attunes anthropology to ways of listening to the socio-political and existential possibilities contained in images that both enable and disable futures of mobility into being.

Keywords

border spectacle; Tina Campt; affective frequencies; co-creative ethnography; legalization; refusal.

The author

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Figure 1 Mohamed's first step. Still image from animation and film *It was Tomorrow* (2018).
View **clip 1** here: https://vimeo.com/517520808 (extract from *It was Tomorrow*)

> Actually, this is where I took my first step on land in Italy. It was on this pier here, in this area. This is what I had been waiting for after forty hours at sea. […] I only saw a passage, and all along the seafront there were journalists, photographers, video cameras recording, cameras flashing. You could see that they had been waiting for us […].
>
> I thought I would arrive in the desert where there is nobody. Where I can do what I want. Instead with all these people…the police arrived. I knew instantly that we would end up in the newspapers like criminals.
> (Mohamed in *It was Tomorrow*[1])

From the moment of disembarkation in the port of Agrigento, in southern Sicily, the mediatic and political discourse of the European border regime was enacted upon Mohamed and his fellow travellers, portraying them as criminals. A decade later, in the scorching summer of 2014, just a year after Mohamed had finally legalised his status through Italy's 2012 amnesty, I followed his wish to return to the site of his first arrival. It was the first time he had set foot there since his crossing.

Together, we explored his experiences through the lens of his newly acquired condition, drawing on his memories and imaginations that had shaped his life story and influenced his sense of self since becoming an undocumented immigrant. He recalled his feelings while we were shooting our documentary as part of a co-creative research on experiences and self-representations of illegalised crossing in the Mediterranean. Images and processes of image-making were central to this exploration. By engaging Mohamed in the creative practices of filmmaking, performing and animating we reflected on his

[1] *It was Tomorrow* is the collaborative film that was produced in 2018, as a result of a research that I carried out between 2012 and 2015. I will refer back to the film and the process of making it at a later stage in the article.

affective and existential relationship with both the governmentalised, mediatised images produced during his disembarkation and those generated later through the legalisation process initiated by the 2012 amnesty in Italy. Collaborative filmmaking, animation and performance provided the ethnographic contexts through which our research has attempted to trace the "resonating frequencies" (Campt 2017) embedded in the visual logics of the border regime. This paper contends that co-creative image making is not simply a methodological tool, but an epistemological practice: one that attunes anthropology to ways of *listening to images* and to the socio-political and existential possibilities they hold. These are possibilities that both enable and disable futures of mobility, often suspended in the ambiguous space between visibility and opacity, refusal and legality.

Meeting the border for the first time

Mohamed had left Tatun, an Egyptian rural town 113 km southwest of Cairo, on a school day in November 2004. He was 17 years old at the time. Two days later, Mohamed landed on the shores of Sicily with 204 other Egyptian young men who had crossed the Mediterranean by boat. He was one of five underage passengers on this journey, and they all came from Tatun[2]. While walking around the harbour, Mohamed recognised a boat that looked very similar to the one that had transported him across the Mediterranean. He took photographs of the pier where he had first set foot and described to me how the moment of disembarkation was captured on many cameras and all passengers were processed by the border guards wearing masks and plastic gloves, "I knew nothing about the arrival" he said,

> I didn't know what awaited me. We didn't know what we had done to attract so much attention, to be so interesting for others, to be photographed and be on television even […] When I put my foot on the ground, it was like when I had my foot on the boat and I'm not in balance. I felt the same thing when they transported me on land. I felt the police holding me, if they had left me I would have fallen. Maybe they were holding us like that so that we don't escape or just simply because we would fall on the floor. I could not stand on land, I saw all the earth move like water, I had this feeling.

He told me it took him the entire night to regain his balance—to feel both feet firmly on the ground again. The lingering effects of three days at sea were captured in Mohamed's

[2] The migration network between Tatun and Milan has been documented by journalists and researchers (see Gabriele Del Grande (2009), Fortress Europe blog, 2 March, article available at https://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/2006/01/tutun-in-egitto-lultimo-quartiere-di.html (accessed 12 January 2024) ; Daily News Egypt online (2015), 22 August, available at: https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2008/01/18/small-fayoum-town-thrives-on-italian-money-of-illegal-immigrants/ (accessed 10 May 2024); Giangrande, F. and Piscitelli, P. (2013) *EgIptaly – Indagine Territoriale sull'Immigrazione Egitto-Italia*. MSc thesis in Urban Planning and Policy Design. Polytechnic University of Milan). Out of the almost 36,000 Egyptians living in Milan most of them come from Tatun, a town of around 40,000 residents that belongs to the larger province of el-Faiyum, Data for Italian statistics provided by ISTAT, updated in 2016. Online available link at: https://www.comuni-italiani.it/statistiche/stranieri/eg.html (accessed 10 May 2024).

animation of his disembarkation (fig. 1 and clip 1). After assisting each passenger off the boat, guards escorted them in pairs, one on each side, holding them firmly under the arms. They were led to a warehouse-like structure, seated in orderly rows on the floor, and called up individually to a table where their fingerprints were taken. The next morning, Mohamed was brought to the closest hospital, where a team of doctors carried out medical tests. In the absence of identification documents, his age was assessed using x-ray imaging of his wrist – a process aimed at determining whether he qualified as a minor eligible for legal protection or as an adult subject to deportation. This procedure, performed without Mohamed's consent, followed the official 'Greulich and Pyle standard'. The x-ray image served as formal evidence used by the authorities to assess the credibility of his stated age.

In a recent edited volume on the politics of x-ray archiving in European states, Shahram Khosravi observes that the same technology used to save lives also produces "convict images" within the context of border control—a device used to categorise and criminalise the bodies of asylum seekers and migrants. By revealing, externalising, and extracting "inner truths," wrist x-rays determine whether a person may be lawfully deported (Khosravi 2024: 20). Mohamed was classified as a minor and placed in a group escorted directly to a reception centre, while the remaining passengers stayed behind on the pier. Here, humanitarian and securitarian logics merge (Fassin 2008) in the sorting process: minors to be protected on one side, adults to be expelled on the other. This dichotomy reproduces racialised and gendered categories of the "perfect victim" and the "monstrous invader" that underpin decisions about who is granted rights and protection—and who is not (Pinelli and Giuliani 2021). Claims have been made that even the very notion of the 'unaccompanied minor' is less about child protection than it is a tool of migration management, part of a broader administrative apparatus that governs mobility (Vacchiano 2013; 2018).

As we walked around the harbour in Agrigento, Mohamed reflected on how the medical, legal, and representational machinery awaiting him at disembarkation had been carefully staged in advance[3]. The overwhelming presence of guards and media – the control exhibited over their bodies and images, how they were touched, managed, and photographed – clashed with his expectation of arriving in a quiet place where he might move freely. "In the middle of the sea I made a promise to God that upon touching land I would immediately pray to thank him for sparing my life," he recalled with some regret. But rather than fulfilling that moment of intimate gratitude, Mohamed found himself carried, directed, scrutinised, measured, and disciplined. The path to social reintegration on the other shore had already been mapped by others, embedded in a series of bureaucratic steps. As he processed the scene unfolding around him, he realised that he had become part of a spectacle where he "would end up in the newspapers like criminals." His animation thus becomes a counter-image – one that listens back to the frames that tried to fix him in place. It is through such practices of co-creative image

[3] see Didier Fassin (2011) and Miriam Ticktin (2011), both notably writing on humanitarian frameworks of reasoning around immigration and asylum in France and other contexts.

making that Mohamed not only reclaims authorship over his own story but also complicates the visual economy of the border.

Caught within a pre-existing web of humanitarian and securitarian narratives, Mohamed and his fellow travellers were transformed into an object of public speculation. The representational field they entered oscillated between the extremes of "all migrants are vulnerable and good" and "all migrants are criminals"– views shaped not by those who crossed the border, but by those who defined how their crossing ought to be seen and understood. Scholars of migration have noted that the legal construction of "irregular" migration in the Schengen area relies on this visual polarity. It "needs both the extreme images of 'desperate and dangerous' people and the grey zone between 'securitarian' and 'humanitarian' practices produced by an 'endless emergency'" (Gatta 2018: 33). In his fieldwork on Lampedusa, Gianluca Gatta observed how border guards and the media co-produced specific images of migrant arrivals. The portrayal of overcrowded boats and dramatic landings feeds into ideologies that justify border control, with the demand that *something must be done* (ibid). The organisation of migrant bodies on the dock – visibly arranged and processed – was staged for media visibility. Gatta argues that the border personnel engaged in 'profilmic behaviour' (de France 1982 in ibid: 35), performing for the cameras and actively contributing to the visual scripting of the event.

In this regime of representation, the figure of the migrant appears "half a devil, half a child": a dangerous body to be controlled, subdued, and silenced. This dual process of criminalisation and infantilisation begins at the moment of landing. Even in the absence of information in his own language, Mohamed intuitively grasped the meaning of this gaze. He understood he was being seen as both threat and object of pity – as a "criminal in the dock." At the same time, he perceived a sharp contrast between this imposed identity and his own sense of self: not as a vulnerable child, but as someone who had just completed a significant rite of passage into manhood. This dissonance stayed with him for years, undermining his self-worth. Refusing the category of the "child in need of protection" that had been assigned to him, and not fully understanding the bureaucratic logic of the centre, Mohamed fled after just fifteen days to join his uncle in Milan. Looking back years later, while revisiting the centre during the making of our documentary, he expressed regret. That decision, taken in resistance, had inadvertently marked him with a decade of illegality.

Yet it is precisely through the act of returning to that place with a camera in hand, speaking in his own voice, and reframing the visual traces of that time, that Mohamed begun to re-inhabit his experience and narrate it differently. As Cristiana Giordano put is so evocatively, it is in the re-collection of "traces and minor details" that exceed the master images and narratives of the state in the heavily bureactratised space of the *sbarco*[4] that a radically different archive of stories can emerge (2019). One that is less open to the scrutinising gaze of the state that frames people according to its recognisable categorisations. Co-creative filmmaking, in this context, became a mode of attunement –

[4] Italian for disembarkation.

an epistemological and affective practice of *listening to* the conflicting meanings inscribed in the border's visual framings. These acts of image-making do not merely recount a story; they register the deeper tension between visibility and official recognition, vulnerability and agency, legality and lived time. They resist closure, transparency and capture while reopening a space for different futures to be imagined – futures not already pre-scripted by the frames of border control.

Images of the border

The image of overcrowded, dangerous boats reaching southern European shores has become one of the most recognisable and overdetermined visual tropes of unauthorised migration. It is almost impossible to imagine the crossing of the Mediterranean without this imagery – a point made by Graw and Schielke (2012), who note how these images circulate widely and powerfully, shaping public perception and policy alike. Visual culture theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Christine Bischoff, Francesca Falk, and Sylvia Kafehsy (2010) have argued that the politicised phenomenon of migration is structurally tied to its visual representation. Mitchell suggests that "images 'go before' the immigrant" (2010: 14), meaning that racialised and securitised imaginaries often precede and precondition the reception of migrants themselves. These visual constructs – deeply entangled with neocolonial and racialised logics that mark non-white male bodies as inherently threatening and in need of constant scrutiny – operate within a wider "spectacle of the border", where migration is staged as both a threat and a humanitarian emergency. Francesca Falk (2010) traces how the metaphor of the overcrowded boat has functioned as a dual symbol: at once evoking invasion in anti-immigrant rhetoric and pathos in humanitarian discourse. Humanitarian iconography in particular often portrays migrants as helpless victims—stripped of agency, passive, and in need of salvation. Such representations circulate through Christian imagery and Western moral vocabularies, forming what Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) calls "solidarity as salvation." As Wright (2010) also argues, this iconography reinforces a neo-colonial gaze, where African migrants are positioned as sacrificial subjects in a theatre of Western benevolence.

However, the spectacle of the border, as explored by theorists such as De Genova (2013) and expanded by Cuttitta (2018), is not merely about visibility – it is about a performative politics of recognition and control. The border becomes a stage where state authorities, humanitarian actors, and the media collaborate (consciously or not) in the production of migrant figures that justify policies of containment and rescue alike. As Cuttitta argues, humanitarianism and securitisation do not simply coexist, they are deeply entangled and co-constitutive (2012). In this context, rescue and control are not opposed but function as complementary tools for the regulation of mobility. The problematic effects of this spectacle are indeed the dehumanisation of migrants and the depoliticisation of the 'migration problem' tout court (Musaró 2015: 16). Within this regime, migrants are rendered simultaneously hyper-visible as objects of pity or fear, and invisible as subjects with histories, aspirations, and voices.

Researchers attempting to understand the complexity of migrants' experiences cannot avoid engaging their epistemic approach with an analysis of the way their interlocutors exist in the realm of representations (Baudrillard's *simulacra*). To challenge the clichés and stereotypes that strip people on the move of their individuality, relationships, stories, and agency, an engaged, public-facing anthropology must commit to a co-creative process of re-signification rooted in aesthetics (Mazzara 2019). This involves not simply representing "others" more accurately, but actively working with them to disrupt the dominant visual grammars that shape migration as crisis. Echoing Heidegger's call to re-endanger the language we use to describe people's worlds and experiences (2000), alternative approaches to audiovisual storytelling become necessary – not only to avoid reproducing 'othering' images, but to enable migrants themselves to question, interpret, and reshape the concepts and aesthetic categories through which they are seen. As Xavier Inda (2000[5]) reminds us, destabilising dominant narratives requires engaging with the "deconstituting potentiality" of emergent visual and narrative practices–those in which migrants' voices and perspectives become the site of a continuous re-signifying process. It is precisely this overdetermination – this foreclosure of complexity and narrative possibility – that our collaborative visual practice set out to interrupt. Rather than contribute to the circulation of spectacularised imagery, we focused on reconfiguring the visual field through ethnographic co-creation (fig.2).

Figure 2 Meeting the border again. Composition of stills from *It was Tomorrow*
View **Clip 2** here: https://vimeo.com/568837419 (extract from *It was Tomorrow*)

In *It was Tomorrow* (2018[6]), a film developed collaboratively with Mohamed Khamis, Mahmoud Hemida and Ali Henish during their legalisation processes, we adopted a hybrid documentary mode that brought together observational footage, photo elicitation, performance, and animation within a creative montage structure. This hybrid

[5] in Mazzara 2019: 5
[6] It was Tomorrow is distributed for educational purposes by the RAI: https://raifilm.org.uk/films/it-was-tomorrow/

form was not an aesthetic choice alone but an epistemological one: a strategy to evoke dimensions of experience that often resist articulation or visibility. Inspired by Suhr and Willerslev's (2012) argument, I approached the montage of our ethnographic film as a way to sustain a productive tension between realism and disruption, allowing the invisible, the affective, and the ambiguous to emerge. Clip 2 exemplifies how such co-creative methods can open up multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives on a single experience – in this case the act of registering at the police headquarters at the beginning of legalisation. By maintaining this tension, the film avoids resolving ambiguity and instead affirms Mohamed's right to opacity (Glissant 1997): his right not to be fully explained, translated, or absorbed by the dominant gaze that offers him recognition.

Drawing on Tina Campt's notion of "listening to images" (2017), our approach treated state-produced photographs, such as identification images, not only as documents of surveillance but as affective objects inscribed with tension, fear, and refusal. These affective traces, often illegible to the state, became starting points for co-creative reflection. A space where Mohamed's reasonings and co-produced images came together to complicate and refuse the penetrating, codifying and objectifying gaze of the state and its apparatuses. Through our work together, we began to explore how these images could be reanimated – inflected with voice, memory, and embodied storytelling that challenge the original terms of visibility imposed on them.

Rather than merely critique the spectacle of the border from afar, our collaborative research sought to intervene in it from within, using ethnographic image-making - following a revealing photo elicitation instance during the process of legalisation – as a way of reclaiming narrative and aesthetic agency. By creating *with* rather than *about*, and by privileging the right to opacity over explanatory transparency, our practice foregrounded how co-creative visual methods can work as forms of "listening"– not just to what is said, but to what images fail or refuse to say.

'Behind a photo there's always a thought'. Meeting the border again - the legalisation process

Figure 3 and **figure 4** Passport photographs at the age of 26 (left) and 17 (right). Still images from *It was Tomorrow*

In this photo here *(fig. 4)* I really want to leave. Actually, it's not that I want to leave really, no…but I want to see other places, like this…go around, travel, do some things. Go to a new place.

Instead in this photo here *(fig. 3)*, […] the thought has stayed in the head, one can't see anything from the photo. […] In each photo there are always some thoughts. Because you make it for a reason anyway…so behind a photo there's always a thought. The photo remains but perhaps the thoughts travel. They can travel…and not return. At the moment you make the photo for a card and you don't get the card, the photo stays but the card isn't there. You didn't get the card, but the thought of having shot that photo for the card always remains […]

The thoughts of this photo here *(fig. 4)*, the old one, were about going away because I was making it for the passport. Because the passport allowed me to travel.
[…] Other photos perhaps I make them only to remind me that I was in that place. My thoughts would be about showing it to my friend, or maybe to my family.

This photo here *(fig. 3)*, I made it for the permit of stay. Without this photo I can't make the permit of stay, because you have to put the photo on the permit. So, behind this photo I always have the thoughts that the permit allows me to study, it allows me to have the driving licence, it also allows me to travel…to do anything 'cause it's an identity document, so…it allows me to live. Because I discovered that here in Italy, without the permit of stay you are nothing. And without the photo you cannot make the permit.

(Mohamed, February 2013)

Mohamed's reasoning follows a kind of Aristotelian logic: if a passport or residence permit is essential for living and moving in the world, and if these documents cannot exist without codified photographs, then those same photographs come to contain the promise of life and mobility afforded by the document they accompany. The bench outside the photographer's shop – where Mohamed had just printed his passport photos – became a space for *listening* to the image that had just been produced.

Listening to the quiet frequencies of images such as identification photographs of Black people and immigrants is, as Tina Campt contends, a vital "practice of looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to other affective frequencies through which photographs register," allowing us to apprehend them "by way of the unspoken relations that structure them" (2017: 8–9). These images – created primarily to meet the regulatory demands of the state or the classificatory logics of colonialism – are rarely produced out of the subject's desire. Rather, as Campt writes, "[t]hey are images required of or imposed upon them by empire, science, or the state" (ivi: 5). Precisely because these images have become so normalised – so embedded in the banal routines of state bureaucracy – we tend not to "read" them at all. Instead, we dismiss them as merely successful instances of "capturing muted governmentalised subjects of the state" (ibid). But, as Campt argues, these images are not mute. If we attune ourselves to their quiet frequencies[7], they begin to reveal themselves as quotidian practices that register "affective" traces – offering

[7] those frequencies that are not heard by the human ear, but are equally perceived in the body in the form of vibration.

alternative accounts of the subjects they depict. Such an attunement enables us to reconsider what these ordinary photographs might make possible. As Campt asserts, they hold a paradoxical potential to "rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce" (ibid).

One way for Mohamed to unearth the thinking behind his recently produced self-portrait was to place it in relation to an earlier portrait taken for a similar purpose of institutional recognition. Separated by ten years of experiences, travel, and dreams, both identification photographs enabled Mohamed to speak about the future possibilities that lie beyond the frame –"the thought that has stayed in the head"– in terms of the state's recognition of his rights to social, existential, and physical mobility. On both occasions, he recalled how the photographer instructed him to straighten his back, look directly into the lens, and smile – confidently, but with restraint. The resulting pose, captured in each image, is at once dignified and reserved. Passport photographs of immigrant subjects are images that strive for respectability and aspiration. They are tied to dreams and the longing for possibilities, while also being inextricably bound to the tightly regulated regimes of social and geographic mobility, power, and social prejudice (Kumar 2000; Campt 2017). Realising that the discussion of his identifying self-portraits had elicited[8] Mohamed to recover the affective qualities that had conferred to them particular meanings, I stimulated our conversation a little further:

A: Is there a difference between the two people here? Is there a different idea of what is possible through each photograph? Is there a different idea of freedom?

M: Actually, what I had in my mind in this earlier photo, is that I thought I was free. Instead, I discovered it was quite the opposite. In this photo I thought I was freer because the passport allows you to go around. Instead, it's worth nothing. By itself it's not valid. It doesn't allow you go around just like this. You need to have the visa. The problem is that in many places you can't have a visa. So, the passport alone can't make you feel free. So, in this photo I thought I was free, but I discovered the opposite. That if you have the passport you're actually constrained, especially with this one…Egyptian.

But with this photo (*showing the most recent one*) I feel I will be freer, yes. I hope it won't be another thought like this (*the one of the previous photo*) that turns out to be negative…because if it becomes negative, I'll never go to the photographer again and I'll never have my picture taken again!

In this photo here (*the old one*) I had many thoughts, and I really wanted to do things. I mean the thoughts of young people, when you are still small and you have all your life ahead of you. Instead,

[8] The elicitation of stories and information through the use of a photograph is nowadays considered to be a convention in the interviewing practices of different disciplines beyond anthropology, such as oral history and the visual social sciences at large. For an explanation of what the process entails and how it contributes to social research, refer to John Collier and Malcolm Collier 1986 "*Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*", University of New Mexico Press

this photo here (*the new one*) makes me return to the thoughts of this earlier one. […] It makes the previous thoughts come back, because when I saw that the passport is worth nothing, I became a bit desperate because I couldn't do anything. But now with this photo here I returned to these thoughts: *I will do*, *I can do*. So, it reawakened some thoughts and some dreams. But the difference is still a lot, a lot, a lot. Because it's one thing to start your life at 17, and another thing if you start it at 26. There are 9 years of difference, in these 9 years you can live a life!

A : And do you feel you are starting your life now, at 26?

M: I feel I am starting anew really…perhaps not my personal life, but my life in general, meaning for everything really. I mean 'cause if it was just my personal life, I can also live by the day and that would be enough. If it was just for me. But now, I am thinking of doing many things for others also. I can't explain this thing, because it is still a dream, so it's still to develop.

The new beginning that Mohamed refers to in our conversations relates to the unexpected and 'critical event' that occurred in his life when we began our research together, which appeared to bring about a fundamental change in his relationship to his life's narrative and to the future. In September 2012, the Italian government decreed an amnesty that allowed people living on Italian territory without papers to legalise their statuses. This process took quite a long time. From the first bureaucratic step to finally obtaining their papers, people could wait between six and eight months. Nevertheless, this made a significant difference in the way they re-described their purpose of migrating to Italy. They saw it as an opportunity for redemption for their future, which in turn was captured in their life stories as much as in their identification photographs with hopeful prospects. Interestingly, however, it was not only the future, in the sense of the forward tense, which was the focus of their narratives, but also their past, as memories re-emerged in the light of changed circumstances. Just as after the crossing of the Mediterranean, when the amnesty was announced, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud felt that all their sacrifices finally made sense again. In the logic of sacrifice, these men turned their sights back on a supposedly better future. A kind of rebirth took place. When Ali came out of the police station, he held his permit in his hand, and kissed it many times, as if to feel its 'reality', and he cried out: "Now we can say we have arrived in Italy! We can really say this is day 1! […] Finally, I am someone, and I can show my identity and be proud! Not like before, when I had to show my Egyptian passport and felt ashamed."

Mohamed maintained a cautious attitude of disbelief. He had accompanied Ali to collect his permit, and although he was clearly happy for his friend, when he turned to me he commented on how sceptical he was that such a change would actually happen.

I really can't see what Ali is living inside himself now. I see him exactly the same, I can't see how anything has changed for him. But I cannot go in his head. For this I need to experience it for myself. I can't wait. But I doubt such a tiny plastic card is actually going to make any difference.

Mohamed, who has spent much more time as an undocumented migrant, had mixed feelings about the attainment of the residence permit. "For the suffering it has cost you all

these years", a friend had told him, "grab the damn thing and break it into pieces!" Mohamed had imagined himself taking revenge on this tiny plastic card, he told me he had reached the point of addressing it in his mind and crying out "I want to hold you only to crush you!".

Hand in hand with hopes of official recognition and a new beginning, this unexpressed rage sat with Mohamed in the photo booth when he had his picture taken for the residence permit. The feelings of anger or shame when exhibiting one's document at border controls or 'stop and search' police checkpoints remain unseen by the authorities, for whom the document and its accompanying photograph only serve to create a link between the papers in their hands and the person standing in front of them. The immigrant's reading of that same document refers to an outside world that is more real as it relates to a lifetime of experiences and relationships. In describing a typical encounter between an immigration officer and an immigrant, Amitava Kumar identifies this difference:

> The immigrant has a scar on his forehead at the very place his passport says that he does. For the officer this probably means that the man is not a fraud. For the immigrant the scar is a reminder of his childhood friend in the village, the one whose younger sister he married last May. Or it is likely he even doesn't notice the officer's glance. He is conscious only of a dark weariness behind his eyes because he has not slept for three days.
> The officer reads the name of the new arrival's place of birth. He has never heard of it. The immigrant has spent all of the thirty-one years of his life in that village. This difference is quite ordinary. But for some reason that he does not understand, the immigrant is filled with shame (2000: 3-4).

As an immigrant writer himself, Kumar asserts that "to describe that shame is part of a historical process" in which we should be able to recognise the history of decolonisation and explain the presence of formerly colonised people in the industrial centres of the West, through migration. In the contrasting emotions of hope and rage, shame and excitement that both Ali and Mohamed felt when holding their passport or residence permit, the racialised and neo-colonial socio-political processes of border regimes are also inscribed. One of these processes is the way in which the time spent waiting - for one's papers and for the realisation of one's aspirations - is imposed and regulated. I believe such time is one of the affective frequencies inscribed in identification photographs.

Co-producing resonating moving images: of ambiguity, change and refusal

Change was experienced and interpreted differently by each of my interlocutors after receiving their documents. For Ali, "Everything will change, everything will be possible"; for Mahmoud, "Now my life can start"; and for Mohamed, more sceptically, "I can't see how this plastic card is going to make any difference." These contrasting reactions reveal

how legalisation is simultaneously imagined as a breakthrough, burden, and broken promise – shaped by past traumas, enduring uncertainty, and what Ghassan Hage (2005) calls "existential mobility," the aspiration to move toward a liveable future self. For Mohamed, legalisation brought the possibility to reimagine the future, but also intensified his ambivalence. It carried with it the scars of past "illegalisation"– what De Genova has theorised as the state's active production of migrant 'illegality' as a condition to later "rectify" (2002:429). The 2012 amnesty, which finally enabled Mohamed's legalisation, followed a failed attempt in 2009, known as the "sanatoria[9] truffa" (fraud amnesty), in which over 400 workers in Milan, including Mohamed and Mahmoud, lost thousands of euros to scams they were powerless to report[10]. Going to the police station was like voluntarily entering the lion's den. Reporting abuse as an 'illegalised' migrant would be like reporting themselves to the authorities. As De Genova argues, these legalising mechanisms are not designed to exclude but to include migrants under deeply asymmetrical and disciplinary terms that protract their vulnerability.

Within this context of conditional recognition – offered by states that simultaneously marginalise, criminalise, and steal migrants' time (Khosravi 2018) – I understand recognition not simply as visibility or acknowledgement, but as a political practice grounded in a colonial legacy (Simpson 2017). Writing about the U.S. state's attempts to extract consent from Native people, Audra Simpson describes recognition as a political practice rooted in the colonial logic of "seeing" subjects as they ought to be seen – knowable, governable, and consistent with dominant notions of personhood and property (ibid: 20). In contexts shaped by dispossession and violent inclusion, recognition becomes a technique of power rather than a path to justice. Thinking with Simpson, I consider the co-created images that emerged through improvised performance and animation as acts of refusal – imaginative and affective efforts to move beyond the visual politics of recognition and identification that dominate Europe's border regimes. These images do not seek to make people crossing more legible to our gaze, but instead open space for ambiguity, opacity, and other ways of relating to the self and others – ways that resist being fully seen, fully known, or fully translated.

[9] In Italian, amnesties bear the name 'sanatoria' which refers to 'curing an inner illness'. An illness that was itself created by the state issuing the amnesty.

[10] A number of human rights organisations and lawyers who had assisted undocumented migrants with all the necessary bureaucratic steps to submit an application reported how this policy led to producing further illegality. Firstly, by restricting eligibility only to two occupational categories: cleaners and caregivers - which meant that most undocumented workers were excluded and had to declare bogus employment to try their chances; and secondly by requiring applications to be completed by employers only. This made the entire process treacherous for many undocumented migrants. They had to entrust the process, their documents and their money to supposed employers or fraudulent brokers, usually of the same nationality, who ended up robbing them and often neglecting the necessary paperwork altogether.

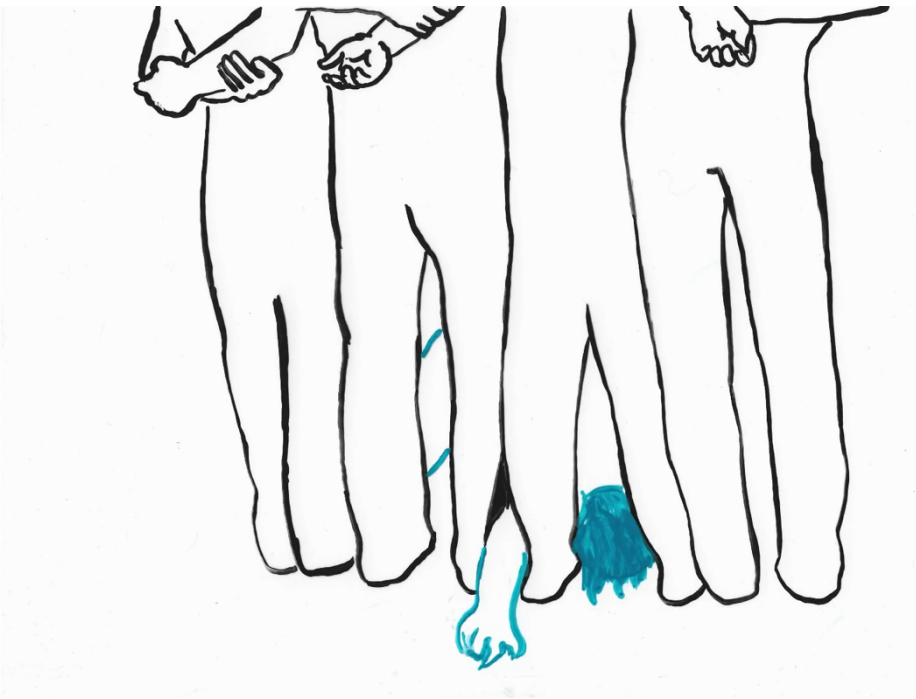

Figure 5 Narrative image n.1. Still image from animated live-action image of improvised performance, *It was Tomorrow*

The contradiction – between recognition and subjection, visibility and constraint – shaped Mohamed's sense of time, selfhood, and social belonging as much as it affected his relationship to governmentalised images. His participation in our visual and performative co-creation practices, including theatre and animation workshops, became a site where these tensions surfaced. While he sought to explore broader social and imaginative spaces beyond his community, his Egyptian acquaintances accused him of "wasting time," interpreting his creative engagement as a refusal to conform to the disciplined productivity expected of a newly legalised migrant. As Mohamed noted, the permit came with expectations to "be someone," but not necessarily someone of his own choosing. Even in legal terms, this "becoming someone" was fraught with precarity. Renewing his permit required uninterrupted employment and compliance with performance metrics – documents, salaries, language proficiency – under the looming threat of re-illegalisation. In practice, the "fresh start" promised by legal status felt more like a reset to square one, where the same cycles of illusory beginnings, deferral, and existential immobility repeated. Lastly, this umpteenth promise of change came with the realisation that he had lost the time of his youth, the time that he thought was better suited to realising his dreams and building himself up.

The morning we waited outside the immigration office for Mohamed to submit his documents for his first residence permit, I remember sitting beside him and noticing his restless trembling hands. He clutched his bag, opened the folder of papers, closed it, then reopened it as if searching for something he feared was missing. "You think they'll find my fingerprints in the system?" he whispered. Years earlier, Mohamed had been stopped on the street, fingerprinted, and issued an expulsion order, which warned that if he was

stopped again, he could be detained and deported. The legalisation form made no mention of how previous expulsions would be treated. As we waited, his thoughts spiralled: what if this time, his fingerprints revealed something unknown to him? What if a bureaucratic trace turned into a criminal record?

For years, his social identification as a criminal – without having committed any crime – had eroded his confidence and complicated his sense of visibility. He felt unseen in ordinary life, and hyper-visible, almost transparent in the eyes of the state. The fear ran deep, he once told me: "I'm like a criminal, without having done anything wrong. Every time I see a police car I think they've come after me." These embodied reactions were traces of what years of "illegality" had inscribed into him: a reflexive anticipation of incrimination, shaped by the gaze of the state.

A month later, on the way to collect the permit, Mohamed reflected on the document's binding force: "It's like a wedding contract. Of marrying Italy. To divorce Italy now, you really need courage. This is a contract you can't dissolve, no? Those who have the permit fear more than those who don't." Echoing De Genova, I came to understand through Mohamed's experience how legalisation demands the internalisation of a disciplinary regime – something he increasingly came to recognise and articulate in his own terms. "They used to say, 'you have nothing to lose.' Now I say, 'I really have something to lose, right?' I need to treat Italy well, behave well outside, or I risk losing the permit. It's like a wife – if you don't treat her well, she leaves." What I understood from Mohamed's words was that rather than merely offering freedom, the permit marked a new form of entrapment – coded as stability, but fraught with conditional belonging. These ambivalent transformations, saturated with both fear and desire, would later shape the images we made together. For instance, this sense of entrapment emerged strongly from an image Ali and Mohamed co-created together during a dramatised activity (fig. 5).

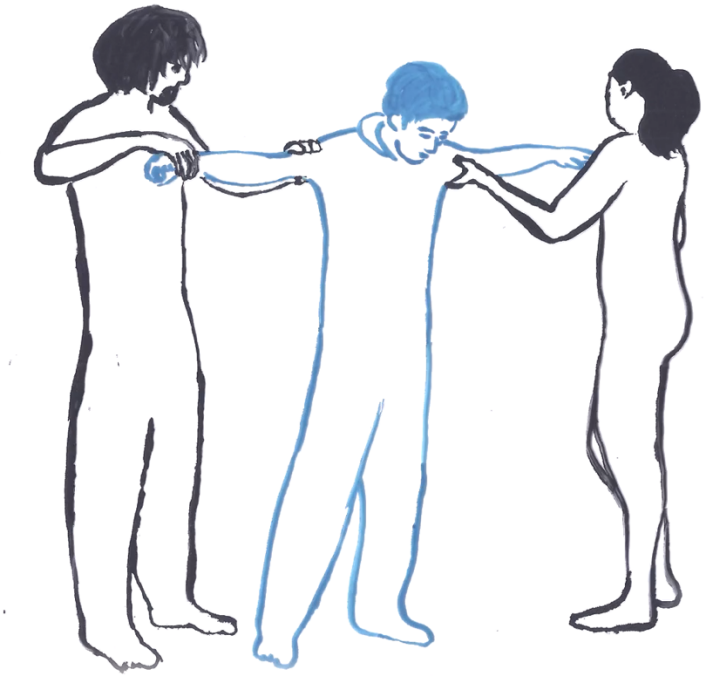

Figure 6 Narrative image n.2. Still image from animated live-action image of improvised performance, *It was Tomorrow*

At the beginning of Mohamed and Ali's legalisation process in September 2012, I invited them to join a theatre workshop co-facilitated with a friend and theatre director Anna Serlenga. Our goal was to co-create an imaginative ethnographic space that could explore how their changing circumstances reshaped their relation to past experiences and a future newly inhabited by shifting possibilities. Using physical improvisation techniques inspired by César Brie[11] and Augusto Boal[12], we aimed to make visible and share feelings and thoughts often inexpressible through words alone (Sjöberg 2009, 2017, 2018).

During an exercise called 'the narrative image,' (fig. 5 and 6) actors improvised around the theme of 'boundary,' using each other's bodies to form fluid compositions that embodied struggle, fragmentation, and containment. Ali created the final sequence, by placing Mohamed standing before a figure sitting confidently with a raised hand, while

[11] César Brie is an Argentinian theatre director, whose work became fairly well known in Italy after co-founding the theatre company Comuna Baires and the theatre collective Tùpac Amaro in Milan in the 1970s, during his exile in Europe during the dictatorship in Argentina. His work is known for being poetical, imaginative and metaphorical.

[12] Augusto Boal is a Brazilian theatre maker and drama theorist who founded Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), which is a community-based educational approach that uses theatre as a tool for social change. Initially developed through Boal's work with rural and working-class communities, it is now applied globally for purposes such as social and political activism, conflict resolution, community development, therapy, and influencing government policies. Influenced by Paulo Freire's influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, TO encourages critical thinking. It promotes analysis over passive acceptance, questioning over providing answers, and action over mere discussion. In TO, physical improvisations come under the name of 'image theatre', a technique through which a group explores image-making scenes to investigate the 'polysemic' qualities of images that are performed out of their habitual social contexts.

two actors pulled and held Mohamed's arms in opposing directions. Behind him, a chorus of actors sang an Egyptian song about the emigrant who does not return[13]. Through repetitive, measured gestures, the group embodied the physical and emotional tension of being caught at the border – neither fully present nor absent, neither free nor imprisoned (to watch the clip of the improvised making of the narrative image n.2: https://vimeo.com/871773085).

In recreating a privileged 'place for viewing' (from the Greek etymology of the term *theatron*) and for affectively "listening to images", theatre practice encouraged introspection and self-analysis in participants, as the reflexive quality of theatre would help them to perceive themselves 'dichotomously' (Boal 1995), simultaneously as actors and as representations.

Theatre practices foster introspection and access to marginalised subjectivities that often elude documentation through traditional verbal methods. By emphasising embodiment, spontaneity, and affect, theatre practice expanded our ethnographic sensibility beyond cognitive and discursive modes. By improvising without direct guidance or words and using each other's bodies to give form to a shared feeling – being at the threshold of the border – the group entered an aesthetic space suspended between truth and fiction. In this creative flow, physical images sparked by past experiences could be reworked, reconstructed and rearranged. Detached from the need to represent personal histories directly, the improvisation opened up a space of ambiguity where performers could shift between proximity and distance, self and other. In this tension, a *subjunctive possibility* emerged: an embodied "what if" that allowed for the imaginative exploration of alternative realities, which became central to the ethnographic process. Through the words, dilemmas and visions that emerge from participants during theatre improvisations and storytelling, visual anthropologists have the opportunity to refuse partaking in the over proliferation and production of images of border crossings that tend to objectify and codify people's bodies. As a reflexive practice, theatre improvisation also provides the ethnographic context for research to investigate into the relationship between movement, memories, imaginations and the possibilities of storytelling. When working with people whose stories, bodies, and identities have been marginalised by dominant powers, placing social research—and the images it generates—into a subjunctive mode holds both political and relational value. It invites us to engage 'as if' other ways of being are possible, reminding us that life exceeds what is observable, knowable, or answerable.

The autobiographical writing that followed revealed divergent responses. Ali wrote about feeling entrapped first in Egypt, unable to enroll at university, and later at the moment of leaving for Italy, torn between two lives. Mohamed focused on arrival in Italy, describing the sense of being repeatedly measured, scrutinised, and confined. After years living at the margins of legality and recognition, he described the realisation of having fallen into yet another trap:

[13] *Ah Ya Lalaly*, by Wust El Balad. Some of the lyrics are as following: *He who emigrated, and does not return to me, he who went far away from me, do tell me, good people, when is he coming back…?* Readers can listen to the song on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epSxq2zc0LA

Really, I felt in a trap when I arrived in Italy. Especially after some time had passed and I found myself alone. The moment I felt alone, I began to think. What have I become? What am I doing? And why do I do the things that I do? Even if I do something that I like, finally I don't find the purpose for doing it. So, I feel completely trapped and I don't see a way out. I feel I am trapped until I manage to get out of Italy.

Yet when the testimony edged too close to his own experience, Mohamed chose to step back, refusing to continue. This refusal became a powerful form of communication – an act of resistance and an ethical call to return to the more silent and opaque practice of image-making. It pointed to the limits of representation and interpretation, reminding us that when stories remain too tightly bound to explanations and factual reality, they can constrain rather than open imaginative possibilities for envisioning lives otherwise (Prendergast and Saxton 2015).

Because of their potential to bridge experience and imagination, the personal and the collective, the embodied and the metaphorical, I chose to weave some of the 'narrative images' into the documentary through montage. Positioned at key moments, they interrupt the linear scene at the police headquarters and re-evoke the non-verbal, affective, and imaginative space generated by the physical improvisations (as seen in clip 2). For this reason, I decided to transform them into hand-drawn rotoscope[14] animations, to enhance the bodily, metaphorical and ambiguous qualities of each scene and evoke Mohamed's ambivalent relationship to the state during his legalisation process. Contrasting with the photographic excess imposed by states, humanitarian agencies and media – where people crossing are hyper-visible yet reduced to bureaucratic categories – these animations enact alternative affective possibilities. They resist immediate legibility and narrative closure, preserving Mohamed's right to opacity and evoking the tension between compliance and refusal that he expressed when receiving his document and holding his identification photographs side by side.

By interweaving these animations with photo-elicited identification portraits and observational footage of his permit registration, the film sustains a dynamic tension between the desire for visibility and the need for opacity, between the pursuit of recognition and the insistence on spaces of freedom.This co-creative image-making practice foregrounds embodiment and performance, offering anthropology a way to *listen* differently to images – not as static representations but as living, affective sites where socio-political and existential possibilities unfold.

Through this approach, co-creative practices attune ethnographic work to ambiguity and refusal, while exploring possibilities that exceed the images produced by the state in such critical border areas. They reveal how images both enable and disable futures of mobility, making visible the complex affective currents shaping migrant lives beyond what can be achieved in ethnographic speech and text. In doing so, they open

[14] A technique that animates live action video by drawing on top of each frame. This can be done digitally through software, or manually by printing out each frame and drawing on acetate paper. I did the latter in order to keep a continuity in form with my participants' handmade animations.

new pathways for understanding migration's unfolding temporalities and the fragile, contested spaces where people who experience it negotiate belonging, visibility, and agency.

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