Reaching Horizons:
exploring past, present and future existential possibilities of
migration and movement through creative practice

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Abstract

Migration has become a topical theme both in academia and in public discourses across the media which have contributed to create a highly political and visual ‘migrant subject’. However, the highly mediatized figure of the migrant has left crucial aspects of migration underrepresented and unrecognised. What is normally concealed and left to the margins of public debate is the individual experience of the protagonists, their imaginative lifeworlds and the complexity of their stories. This practice-based research has centred its inquiry on the relationship between the lived experiences and the imagination of past, present and future existential possibilities, by engaging three Egyptian migrants through the creative processes of theatre improvisations, storytelling practices, participatory photography, collaborative filmmaking and animation.

It recognizes the fundamental role that imagination and future existential possibilities play in people’s perceptions of reality, in their decisions and actions, and finally in the way they narrate their experiences. In order to better understand how individuals make their choices, interact with each other, understand themselves and the world around them, I have argued that we need to take into account their biographies and imaginative inner lives as the ways people retell their stories allow space for contradiction, feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty, unlaced and unfinished thoughts and existential dilemmas. Imaginative realms of existence are ever-changing and ungraspable, posing a challenge to conventional methodologies in the social sciences which rely heavily on observation, interviews and text.

The thesis is divided into two parts. By using the ethnographic material that emerged during fieldwork and from the creative processes, in the first part I look at the role imagination and the future play in Ali’s, Mohamed’s and Mahmoud’s relationships to their origins, and to their decisions and experiences of illegally crossing the Mediterranean Sea in order to reach Milan (Italy). The second part describes and reflects upon the performative and audio-visual collaborative practices that involved my participants in producing their own narrations and theoretical reflections on their experiences, aspirations and memories. It is thanks to the ‘subjunctive possibilities’ enabled by performative improvisations, creative storytelling and the animation that my participants and I could explore their mnemonic and imaginative processes. Finally, the thesis concludes by arguing for social research to engage participants in more collaborative and creative practices in the study of migration, as a necessary way of involving the protagonists in producing the questions and counter-narratives that reclaim their acts of struggle and their creative imaginative abilities to contrast objectifying political discourses and exclusionary legal and bureaucratic procedures.
Declaration
No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other institute of learning.

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The research film *It was Tomorrow* (Alexandra D’Onofrio 2017) is available to view at the following website:

https://vimeo.com/186236229

password: Horizons2017
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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

- T.S. Eliot, Four quartets

...this better life, better than the dreams you had, will return
- Mahmoud, postcard from the future
Introduction

Mohamed points at the rocky hill rising behind the last barracks of the reception centre for minors. “That’s where I hid for a whole afternoon, waiting for the sun to set. Then I could run away and nobody could see me.” We are in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by barren hills and olive groves in the countryside of the island of Sicily, around 20km from the nearest town of Agrigento, and three days of sailing from the Libyan shores. The insistent chirping of cicadas and the stillness in the air adds to the sense of this place being the furthest away from the idea of “life” Mohamed had crossed the sea for at the age of 17. Ten years later he took the decision to return with me, to visit his first place of arrival in Italy. A whole lifetime seems to have passed in the meantime, but the environment appears untouched by years. “I was only thinking of Milan. Milan for me was the whole of Italy. Here, when I looked around I could not see Italy. I was still in Africa.” Skeptic towards the evidence unfolding before his eyes, Mohamed only trusted what he knew. The place called Milan, which he had so often heard described by his neighbours in Egypt, was a big city where everything was on the move, where there were lots of people, including most of his fellow villagers. A city so clean, whose surfaces “were like transparent glass”. That was the place of a thousand possibilities and it looked nothing like Tatoun, his home village, or the African-looking surroundings of the reception centre in Sicily. This imagined Italy coincided with stories he had grown up with and with his wildest desires. Milan was the place of an imagined future he had to make his own by leaving his family and facing the deathly waves of Al Bahar Al Mutawassit, the Arabic term for the Mediterranean, meaning “the sea in between”. Between, Mohamed believed, his past and his future. Once disembarked on land, he was identified by the Italian authorities and placed in the reception centre for minors, where he was told he had to remain and wait. At the time he did not understand what he had to wait for, as he was not expecting anything from the authorities, and he was not a criminal to be controlled or isolated. “I didn’t come all the way here to stay put and comfortable”, he told me as I recorded his words with a videocamera and followed him up the rocky hill. After various failed attempts and only 15 days after his arrival, he managed to escape.

I felt I had done a great thing to escape from the centre. Not to escape because I was a bad guy there…No, I felt it was great because I managed it by myself. Then doing such a journey until reaching Milan, this thing made me really feel confident
and capable of doing anything. I really could do anything. And there [in Milan] they told me: “no, you’re too young to work.” What were they saying? I travelled all the way to come here! Milan was the final destination. We all aim at getting up there, without even thinking what there will be, perhaps we get up there but then there’s no possibility of returning. But our idea was just to get there. You might be walking and walking, and you always look high up, you don’t look at what is around you or in front of you. You don’t care about what you find on the way, all you care about is getting up there. When you get there, you don’t find anything and then you’re forced to look back. When you look back you see some beautiful things, but it costs too much to return. Sometimes you can’t even go back. It’s the same thing for me, really. I look at Milan, with all the struggle I went through… I could have stayed in Agrigento.

Or in Egypt, he would say when he was particularly frustrated with life in Italy. Perhaps Mohamed did not find what he had been hoping for during and after crossing the Mediterranean on a hazardous fishing boat. But what he clearly expressed in his narration was that the future and existential possibilities he would have been denied in Tatoun had to be conquered by setting one’s hopes high and by defying what prevented him from taking his life in his own hands. In order to achieve this, Mohamed’s imagination and future purpose was to (trans)form his experience of reality in a very particular way, propelling him to move in a specific direction, getting him through a transformational experience that would turn him into a fully grown man, capable of working and defining his own path in life. But then, when one’s aspirations are not fulfilled, one might be tempted to look back at the possible lives and futures that lay in the past. Following Eliot’s verse: “Down the passage which we did not take, Towards the door we never opened”.

The present practice-based research focuses on experiences of migration during what are perceived as existential ‘turning points’ (Lucht 2012) by the protagonists themselves. It has developed theoretically and methodologically through collaboration with Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud, three Egyptian men who have migrated to Milan in search of better economic and living opportunities.

Migration has become an extremely topical theme in contemporary public and political discourse. In academic circles it is understood as intrinsically linked to the effects of modernity, capitalism and globalisation, posing a challenge to previous anthropological
approaches to identity and locality as territorially bounded, self-contained and structured. As people move and engage with more than one place simultaneously, the changing landscapes of group identity, so-called contemporary ‘ethносcape’, ask for new approaches in the practice of anthropology to recognise the central role played by imagination in social life (Appadurai 1991). Globalisation, Appadurai argues, has provoked the imagination to grow in scale, reflected in the observation that “[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of “possible” lives than they ever did before” (1991: 197). This emphasises the role of imagination in the way ordinary people construct their biographies, interweaving experiences around events that often carry an array of different imaginative possibilities.

Following a growing number of scholars (Jackson 2008, 2012, 2013; Schielke 2008, 2015; Schielke and Graw 2012; Lucht 2012 to cite a few) this research aims to contribute to the widening study of migration by complementing the most common debates on the phenomenon, which focus on its socioeconomic and political causes and effects, with a renewed attention to the subjective experience and existential causes and consequences of migratory processes. Through my participants’ stories and dilemmas, it aims to explore the ‘imaginative horizons’ that have taken hold of their perceptions of reality, influencing the ways they interpret their life trajectories and question their life purposes. Though always constitutive of human experience, people’s imaginative and interior life-worlds are transient and ever changing; they resist full articulation. They can be so present, but at the same time they remain intangible and immaterial. Imagination allows us to access a reality of possibilities we do not see or hear, dimensions of experience that lie beyond the immediate perception of objects and landscapes. Thus their inherent quality presents a challenge to more conventional methods of enquiry that depend on physical presence, verbal exchange and observation. Also in terms of (re)presentation, anthropologists, such as Irving and Rapport (2009)¹, have asked the wider community of social scientists whether there are ways our critical analysis can reflect the importance of people’s interior dialogue, fantasies, reverie and imagination “without turning them into reified states or static properties”. By acknowledging these challenges and the interdependence of reality with our projections of what lies beyond the horizon, which Crapanzano poetically analyses in his book Imaginative Horizons: an essay in literary-philosophical anthropology (2004), this study poses two sets of questions which form the structure of the present thesis.

¹ This was a question posed by the authors as a call for a conference panel at the ASA conference in 2009 (http://www.nomadit.co.uk/asa/asa09/panels.php5?PanelID=551 accessed March 7, 2017)
The first part, composed of Chapter One and Chapter Two, gives a historical and ethnographic context to the ways in which my research participants conceptualise their origins, their sense of belonging and their subjective motivations for crossing borders illegally in order to reach the existential possibilities their imagination and experiences have produced. It raises questions such as: what qualities may imaginings of the past and future have in the experiences of Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud before, during and after crossing the sea? How do these imaginative possibilities motivate and influence actions and decisions and simultaneously affect the ways auto-biographical stories are narrated? Throughout the thesis, my aim has been to build my arguments around the starting point of Ali, Mahmoud and Mohamed’s stories that relate to specific “critical events” in their lives, such as the Egyptian uprising, the presidential elections, the illegal Mediterranean crossing and the acquisition of a legal status, and what they revealed as being of essential methodological worth as situations of intense conflict and of creative and generative potential. It is a conscious decision to consider those critical transitions and the way they are re-inscribed in the life histories and biographical narrations of my participants’ existences as the epistemological core of this research. In this thesis the concept of “critical event” is a returning trope, as my interlocutors see specific events as representing a rupture in the apparent normality of life.

I use this notion based on the way Bruce Kapferer (2010) conceptualises it, following the Manchester school’s interest in atypical events that express crisis and conflict or that brought to the fore the very socio-political tensions constituting the heart of everyday life. At a closer look, such events would reveal “dimensions of the potentialities of the realities within which they irrupted” (Kapferer 2010: 2). From this understanding, events are not seen as illustrative generalisations regarding structural patterns of socio-cultural practice. This approach is also close to the more philosophical understanding of “events” developed by Gilles Deleuze (2004), Félix Guattari (with Deleuze, 1994) and Alain Badiou (2006[1988]). Applying a post-structuralist appreciation of events, these authors break away from previous structural-functionalist views that primarily saw such happenings as micro examples of macro social dynamics. Fundamental structural discursive forces play out in the events human beings identify as important, but the way specific events have been treated in this research comes close to the Deleuzian orientation which conceives of them as critical sites of emergence, offering a space of tension within which a “singularity of a particular multiplicity” comes into being while simultaneously “opening toward new horizons of potential” (Kapferer 2010: 15). Events are also interpreted retroactively by those who ascribe
them particular significance. They are present-future oriented, not so much in the sense of determining future events and developments, but because they are themselves determined by events that will occur thereafter. If any new theoretical directions are to be discovered throughout this research, these will have emerged out of the ways my research participants have been framing these events into their own narrations, often expressing existential dilemmas and contrasting and contradictory thoughts and feelings.

The second part of this thesis explores the relationships between the experience of migration, the imagination, and stories through the experimentation of different creative methods. It reflects on the possible ways for researchers to engage their field participants in creative processes that create the ethnographic context for imagination and memories to emerge through the physicality of the moving body, theatre improvisation, and the poetic and aesthetic re-creation of experiences and events. Through the processes and practices of theatre, storytelling, photography, filmmaking and animation, this practice-based doctoral research wants to develop collaborative methods that directly engage with questions regarding epistemology and representation: how do implicit social and individual imaginaries enter into dialogue with facts, actions and their materiality? What forms of knowledge creation can anthropologists apply in order to make such implicit information explicit (Sjöberg 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2017 and Forthcoming)? And finally, by not limiting ethnographic (re)presentation to the findings of anthropological observation, how can we create a space in our final outcomes in order to include what normally slips out of the grid of structured language and objectifying imagery? The second part, comprising Chapters Three and Four, is introduced by a contextual description of the creative process and of the theoretical considerations developed by scholars in visual anthropology, performance and animation studies that have allowed me to observe my fieldwork practice more analytically. This approach has been devised within the wider remit of the Anthropology, Media and Performance PhD programme (AMP), jointly hosted by the Drama SA and the Anthropology DA at The University of Manchester. AMP is an interdisciplinary and practice-based PhD programme combining ethnographic fieldwork methods with creative practice. The practice has to be integral to the argument and build on co-creative and reflexive approaches to draw on the imagination of the participants. AMP also requires
a reflexive context aiming to make the producers, processes and products of the research transparent, and allowing for continuous participant feedback.²

Chapter Three takes the reader through the considerations and stories produced during the initial phase of fieldwork, where we experimented with theatre improvisation and storytelling practices within a larger group of actors and participant audiences. Through games and exercises we focused on physical and verbal improvisation and representation. The aim was to explore certain experiences and enact different possible futures and existential options through improvisation. The storytelling events were devised with Mahmoud, Ali and Mohammed, who narrated a story that was meaningful to them for the topic they identified with. This process trained them as storytellers, to select themes, words and moral or existential questions that could engage a heterogeneous audience who did not necessarily have similar experiential, social or religious background, thus rendering them the first ‘translators’ of their experiences and imaginary worlds.

Chapter Four bridges the previous performative processes with the experimentation of audio-visual methods. It looks at walking, narration and photography during our visits back to their first places of arrival, a journey Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud proposed to take for our research after their legalisation, which they perceived as a “critical event” that opened up a future of possibilities, affecting the way they conceptualised their past experiences and existential possibilities. Incorporating animation extended our audio-visual practice so that by improvising their drawings on captured photographs, they could bring back to life the memories, imaginations and feelings associated with that specific place. It is in their creative re-workings of reality that performance and animation may extend the possibilities and purposes of ethnography and visual anthropology. By entering a subjunctive mode where it is possible to overturn official narratives and social hierarchies, dissociating the notions of analytical distance and truth, we are able to fully engage with research participants who become co-researchers in the ethnographic process, following the many different routes their imaginations and truth claims might take us.

² http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/postgraduate-research/programmes/list/08459/phd-anthropology-media-and-performance/, accessed on March 25, 2017
Chapter One
Desiring an Elsewhere at Home: The Egyptian Context

It’s the 18th June 2012, a warm afternoon at the end of spring in a little town on the periphery of Milan and the pleasant climate encourages everyone to be outdoors to enjoy the last hours of sunlight. But something crucial is taking place on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean and almost all of my Egyptian acquaintances feel compelled to watch the news. After the protests on Tahrir Square that sparked events leading to the overthrow of the military regime of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt is negotiating its second epochal phase, which dictated socio-political events inside the country and the perceptions Egyptians had of themselves around the world. With unrestrained excitement, Mahmoud is perched on the edge of an armchair in front of the screen, a metre away from the images of Tahrir Square, the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, and the parliament where the new president will be admitted when they announce the results of the first democratic presidential elections since the uprising. Mohamed has a very different posture. Sitting on the furthest sofa, his body sinking into the cushions, he looks at the images with disenchantment. The contest is between Mohamed Morsi, the candidate representing the Muslim Brotherhood, and Ahmed Shafik, the prime minister of the previous military government. Compelled to take a side, the preference in the room is for the Islamist candidate, though they are not without their doubts.

“If Shafiq wins, then what was the point of the whole revolution? How can anyone vote for him?” Mahmoud asks, anxious as the first figures are released and present the two candidates as almost neck and neck for a second ballot.

Critical events, such as a political election, offer valuable opportunities for social scientific analysis as people are forced to question themselves their political and social beliefs, and expose their fears and hopes toward the ways in which change could affect their personal and social lives.

The period leading up to the elections had already seen a diminishing rate of enthusiasm following the unbelievable days after 25 January 2011, when the future of the country had been open to all possibilities for the first time in three decades. After a year and a half, the Egyptian people were to choose between a candidate that still represented the deposed government, and his challenger, who belonged to the only
sufficiently politically organized party of the opposition. Thus, the alternative scenarios drastically shrunk to one. Nonetheless Mahmoud seems to have retained a sense of hope and anticipation, expressed by voting both in the parliamentary elections, and in the two rounds of presidential elections. He still appears to nurture aspirations toward his own and his nation’s future. He shuts his eyes to listen more attentively to the reporter, waiting impatiently for every word. Mohamed, instead, abstained from casting his vote and has given in to resignation. With his arms folded he stares at the screen, indifferent.

As I observe my friends and their opposing physical, emotional and political engagements, I begin to ask myself whether the palpable tension in the room is an expression of the contrasting emotions Egyptians feel towards the future scenarios represented by the two candidates. How are Mohamed and Mahmoud inhabiting those imaginative scenarios? What and how does that moment reflect their own uncertainties and hopes towards their nation, based on their past experiences and their own personal futures?

Finally, the results are announced and Morsi is proclaimed the new president of Egypt after achieving 51% of the vote. The images of Tahrir Square and of the streets of Cairo and Alexandria show his supporters burst into song and cries of celebration. Mahmoud cries out too, in exaltation: “Now I can return to Egypt! In two years’ time, I’ll go back!” He moves toward the screen and with a gesture familiar to swimmers, he says “I want to dive in, I want to be celebrating with all those people. Look, I am there already!” Mohamed, on the other hand, remains immobile and shakes his head: “So what? It’s the same thing again and again, nothing will change. I really can’t feel what all those people in Tahrir are feeling right now.”

A brief historical background on the Egyptian political situation might be useful to understand the contrasting feelings expressed by Mahmoud and Mohamed in their words and their bodies.
The Entanglement of Hope and Disenchantment: Following socio-political events in Egypt

Since Egypt became a republic in 1953, the political history of the country has been marked by a succession of three long-lasting military regimes: Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970), Anwar al- Sadat (1970-1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011). Though Nasser’s period was characterized by anti-colonial nationalist ideals and socialist reforms, bringing the Suez Canal under Egyptian national control and distancing the country from Western influence and presence in favour of pan-Arab alliances, the succeeding governments relaxed and increasingly reduced the state’s control over the economy, encouraging private and international investment. Starting in the 70s with Sadat, and even more so during the following decade under Mubarak, the government’s domestic and international policies and reforms shifted more and more toward Western neoliberal ideals. During all three authoritarian regimes, no political opposition was tolerated and Islamic political organizations in particular were targeted with violent repression. The power of the military and police to enforce authoritarian rule had been extended and enhanced by protracted state of emergency laws still in force after being imposed throughout the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. Under emergency laws, constitutional and civil rights are suspended and censorship is legalized. Furthermore these laws intend to circumscribe all non-governmental political activity by formally banning street demonstrations, non-approved political organizations and unregistered financial donations. Under Mubarak, the law arrested and detained thousands of people, and the political prisoners amounted to around 30 thousand, of which, apart from leftist and secular opponents to the government, a large part was represented by leaders and activists of the Muslim Brotherhood, the most enduring opposition group in the country. Their significance soon spread and, since its foundation in 1928, they have influenced other Islamist political groups in the Middle East. A similar heavy crackdown and criminalization of Islamic political organizations has since been carried out by other official leaders in the region (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, United Emirates and more recently Saudi Arabia).

3 http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2005/759/eg8.htm
4 http://europe.newsweek.com/short-history-islamism-298235?rm=eu
Though there had been previous strikes and clashes with the authorities in Egypt as elsewhere, the popular uprisings that erupted in 2011 took everyone by surprise as nobody, not even the political establishment, intelligence agencies, think tanks and social scientists, whose business it was to monitor these events, would ever have imagined such a mass participation of ordinary people and such an effective and quick deposition of the ruling authorities (see Schielke’s blog “You’ll be late for the revolution”, Bayat 2011, 2013b; Korany and El Mahdi 2012). Women, children, state employees, small farmers, slum dwellers, students, rural migrants, elderly, young, leftists, nationalists, Christians and Muslims took to the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Islamiya, Mansoura, Tanta, Aswan and Assiut as well as other minor cities around the country. The media were constantly broadcasting from Tahrir Square, a place that became the emblem of the revolution, to report upon the unprecedented popular and peaceful movement. Through fighting together, barricading, debating, camping, cooking, caring for the wounded and for the square itself, the protesters joining in Tahrir to demand “freedom, justice and dignity” created a sense of *communitas* where everyone believed something radically new was coming to life (Bayat 2013a).

Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud, who were following the news on Aljazeera, could not believe the images they were seeing. The chants, the euphoria, the sacrifice of the revolutionary *shahid* (the Arabic word for martyrs), and the solidarity documented during those days in the square created great expectation, apprehension, excitement, a sense of pride and empathy in those overseas. They were overwhelmed, through the news, posts on Facebook and images of the square, by the protesting community that was rapidly changing the fate of their nation. Mohamed had even imagined himself in the clashes with the military in the first few days. During a conversation a year later, he told me with his usual resoluteness:

M: I would be one of the first people to die, right from the beginning… really.
A: You wouldn’t have been afraid?
M: You see, we all die for sure. When the angel that takes your soul comes to you, it comes to you. There’s nothing you can do about it. So I can be at home, or at work, and the angel will come wherever I am, at any time. It’s the way I will die that makes me reflect a lot, not when and where. How I will die… because that’s what will remain of me, no? If they kill me while I’m stealing, the story that remains is of Mohamed who was doing those things and that’s how he died. This will always be
the story, so I will leave a bad memory of myself and of my family. Also my family, what story will they remember me by, when they will say: “we had a son that did these things”? It will be shameful for them. Because it’s the last thing that I might do, and it will always stay with them. So I always think of what I’m doing, as I could die while doing it. And even if it’s not true, one never knows how the rumours will change things. Like now for example, these people that died during the revolution. They died for this reason, so everyone is happy for them, because they fought for something right. Nobody went to their family to say: “your son did the wrong thing, he shouldn’t have gone to the square!” No, on the contrary. Did you see the courage of that young man facing the tank on the street?

A: Yes, that video is very famous…

M: Well, he had to die. He knew he had to die. He had seen death in front of his eyes. The tank was in front of him and proceeding in his direction. He could have seen it and run away. But he didn’t move, so that made me think that he wasn’t seeing. In the sense that he was blinded, he had no fear, he didn’t see the fear of death, he saw nothing at all. He knew he had to die, so instead of being afraid he built up more courage! Take my soul, ‘cause I’m not scared.

Perhaps what Mohamed was telling me was that, though death is an unavoidable fate for all of us, he felt we all had responsibility for the stories the circumstances and cause of our death would initiate. According to Mohamed, moral or immoral actions and the stories connected to a person’s death have an important impact on the future and upon the memory of the survivors and their close kin. A person dying while attempting to achieve something better for himself, for his family and for his people will somehow leave a comforting story for his loved ones to replace his absence with. In extending Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ which refer to a series of techniques which enable individuals, alone or with the collaboration of others, to apply “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (1988: 185), Farha Ghannam argues that “these techniques extend beyond the biological existence of individuals in this life and are deployed to shape their afterlife” (2015: 632). Death narratives, such as the ones Mohamed alludes

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5 in Ghannam 2015:632
to, have a performative function, in producing a ‘good ending’ to a man’s life. It is through the words and prayers of one’s kin and of those who commemorate the deceased through stories of a proper Islamic life and virtuous death that the possibility of a heavenly afterlife is secured. Ghannam, who has looked at how different deaths have been defined as deaths by martyrdom, before, during and after the Egyptian uprising, claims that there are multiple ways of becoming a martyr besides dying by promulgating the message of God, protecting Islam and Muslims and fighting the ‘infidels’. The way in which one dies therefore is highly significant, and the rumours or narratives regarding his death, as Mohamed points out, even more so as “they are imaginatively constructed in a present context that draws on past events to produce a desired future” (Ghannam 2015: 632).

In contrast with what he expressed during the presidential elections, the previous conversation with Mohamed reveals that he had not, in fact, always been so resigned towards his country’s socio-political situation and the possibility that something could change. On the 11th February 2011, the day Mubarak stepped down from power, and in the period immediately after, he had joined the celebrations and renewed his sense of hope. This was connected to so many aspects at once: hope for his country and his people, hope for his future return, hope for the man that he could become for himself and in the eyes of others. In the historical moment when Egypt, from being a peripheral nation in the collective imagination, came to occupy centre stage in the daily news, Mohamed too felt he finally had the chance to rewrite parts of his own life-story, to review his past and to re-imagine his future. In a video I shot during the celebrations in the square at the main train station in Milan, he cried out: “Now we can be proud of being Egyptian!” However, as months went by, his initial enthusiasm had to come to terms with the frustration of his permanently unstable legal situation in Italy and with the uncertainty of these political events in Egypt and where they might lead. From their relatives back home in the villages, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud were receiving descriptions of an unsafe and uncertain state of things in the villages as much as in the big cities. They became particularly concerned with the news of unruly behaviour, as there were less police and a general sense of confusion and insecurity was spreading through the country. Unemployment was at its peak and Egypt plunged into a deep economic crisis. 18 months after the uprising, human rights observers and social scientists began to doubt the success of the revolution, and wondered why no significant changes were occurring at the
political level (Schielke 2011; Bayat 2013a; Human Rights Watch World Report: Egypt 2012 and 2013). Revolutionaries and activists were plunged into a sense of disenchantment and disappointment. Others began to desire and request a return to stability and safety. The corrupt system that had been operating for decades before the revolution was still in place and there was no ideological alternative to uproot it from the governing body and from people’s daily interactions with each other and the country’s institutions. Beyond the excitement of the days of the revolution, and the romanticized narrative that emerged to capture and immortalize the emotions felt by those who engaged in the protests, it is important to note that according to Samuli Schielke (2015), most Egyptians did not take part in the leap of action represented by the mass mobilization of those days. For many people, including those who shared the protestors’ discontent over the status of things, “the revolution was a disconcerting and frightening experience. Rather than giving them the power to change the world, it deprived them of their power to do anything about their situation” (Schielke 2015: 182). Many women were scared to step out into the streets; mothers who stayed at home with their children were constantly afraid for their family’s security and would have found it very difficult to support a long-lasting struggle with neither income nor safe freedom of movement (Winegar 2012). People who, thanks to their connections, had managed to make a living out of the informal economy, were left without income and experienced a condition of chaos. What Schielke’s research reveals is that the political events following the January 25 revolution were transient and incomplete. The revolution was not shared by all and in the end, it failed catastrophically. According to Asef Bayat (2013a) the speed characterizing the fall of long-term authoritarian rulers, and the dismantling of a number of institutions associated with them (political parties, legislative bodies and a few ministries), failed to leave the necessary time for the opposition to build their own parallel organs of government. Moreover he argues that, by requesting the institutions of the regime still standing (the military for example) to carry out substantial reforms on behalf of the revolution, the revolutionaries lacked their own administrative authority and failed to rule. Thus instead of establishing something completely new, Bayat poignantly notes that the revolution ended up being more akin to a “refolution” (2013a: 58), and as new structures started to emerge, they were not taken over by the revolutionaries but by what he calls the “free-riders” of the revolution, indicating the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. These Islamic, or as Bayat terms, ‘post-Islamic’ political currents, had not participated at the very beginning of the struggle against the
dictatorship in January 2011, but had remained on the sidelines as they feared yet another repressive reaction from state forces. Nonetheless when millions of Egyptians took to the streets, inspired by their Tunisian counterparts, there was a silent fear and a murmur of hesitation that the uprising in Egypt, as elsewhere, would turn into an “Islamist revolution”, downplaying its democratic thrust and comparing it to a similar occurrence in the Iranian political arena in 1979. Bayat explains that the idea of an Islamic revolution had been created by different parties (2011). First of all by Mubarak himself who wished to create concern in his Western allies, preventing them from siding with the revolutionaries. Secondly, it was an idea promulgated by Netanyahu’s Israel and in consequence by its US and European allies, whose intentions were to keep Egypt’s autocratic regime in place in order to safeguard mutual international interests. Then Al-Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri, resentful of being pushed into the sidelines by the popularity of these democratic revolts, proclaimed the Egyptian revolution was inspired by Islamic jihad. Finally, ordinary people also played a part in the creation of this idea, as many expressed their genuine concern about the uprising becoming a possible repetition of the Islamic revolution in the Arab world. According to Bayat, Islamist ideology had become more and more unpopular since 9/11, and its violation of people’s democratic rights significantly undermined its legitimacy. As a consequence, a different kind of religious polity came into being in what he calls a post-Islamist Middle East, “which takes democracy seriously, while wishing to promote pious sensibilities in society” (2011:9). Schielke also notes that over the past four decades, religion (both for Christians and Muslims) has been the primary source of a sense of hope and trust in Egyptians. This is confirmed by a “tremendous increase and a significant shift in religiosity among Egyptians” (2015: 3). Within the Muslim majority of the population, “an Islamic revival has made a scripturally oriented and conservative sense of religiosity the most powerful source of moral certainty and existential hope” (ibid). But the short-lived and much contested time in power of the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated that though its declared aim was to build a well-functioning neoliberalism with conservative social and educational policies, it also “became involved in the same kind of clientelistic politics of intransparency, favours, unequal access, and repression as its predecessors” (2015: 186). By instrumentalizing religion in the service of corrupt politics, the Muslim Brotherhood experienced substantial dissent both from within and outside of the organization.
Throughout the years of constant political turmoil, Egyptians continuously changed their views and visions. For example, though both Ali and Mahmoud had voted during the first round of presidential elections for Nasserist Hamdeen Sabahi, they then declared their fear of the Egyptian government becoming Islamist during the second round when faced with the dilemma of whether to re-elect the candidate that represented Mubarak’s regime or the one belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. They eventually voted for the latter in the hope that the Islamic party could at least bring a change to the way politics had been run by previous untrustworthy governments. But this hope didn’t last long, and the Egyptian socio-political scenario remained chaotic. Schielke suggests this was because a new state of “as if” was yet to be achieved (2015: 185).

A further consequence of the uprisings was that, instead of staying and getting involved in the development of a “new” nation (as the revolutionary educated elite wanted to encourage the youth to do), many young people felt disenfranchised and began to lose trust in the transitional military and the following Islamic government to bring about the changes requested by the protestors. Once again, they began to see emigration as their only option in transforming their situation for the better. During the revolts in Tunisia, for example, there was a shocking increase in the number of people crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe in the first few months after the revolution (Polchi 2011; Frenzen 2011). This en masse exodus in the aftermath of Ben Ali’s ousting has been understood as a way for thousands of young Tunisian men from the impoverished areas of the country to enact their newly conquered political freedom ‘as a freedom of movement’ (Tazzioli, Sossi and Garelli 2013). This brought a class divide within society to the surface, between a mainly educated and activist upper middle class and the protesting lower working class. The latter and poorer of these two, who were mostly candidates to illegal migration, used this unstable situation as an opportunity to leave, perhaps aware of the fact that things would still take forever to change for them. They could still try to reach their ideal life by exercising the freedom that was part of what the revolution was about and cross the border.

**Modernity at “Home”: Entrapments within the sirens’ call**

As described at the start of this chapter, Mahmoud and Mohamed’s contrasting reactions to the presidential elections were an expression of the ambivalence in the ways they related to
their country. This feeling is connected both to what had happened and was happening in Egypt, and to their current experiences in Italy. The fact they often had to endure hardship, loneliness and exploitation at work, without being able to easily return to their families, reminded them of a place they felt they belonged, but a place that at the same time had rejected them and bore the responsibility of their situation. To their mind, Egypt was the country that denied them a future, a sense of personal and collective trajectory and growth. In Egypt, but also in Italy where these men without documents were confined, in the periphery of the world they wished to access, this lack of future is often translated into a sense of great frustration and unfulfillment. By critically analyzing the sense of hope, frustration and ambivalence in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis⁶, Schielke gives us a picture of what his interlocutors mean when they say they are bored and desperate for something to happen, for a change to occur in their lives. According to reflections developed during their conversations, this sense of monotony and frustration derives from the desires and promises introduced into the rural context during the advent of modernity and capitalism, and the villagers ensuing feelings that it is impossible for them to meet “the aspirations for a better and more exciting life” (Schielke 2008: 258). Frustrations and aspirations have contributed to turning international migration into a widespread phenomenon in many rural areas and urban peripheries of Egypt, but not there alone. Most people who migrate to Europe from the Middle East and north Africa come from rural areas and the peripheries of larger cities. Specifically in the Egyptian historical and political context, the economic liberalization introduced by president Anwar Sadat in the 1970s and the development of international labour migration, which was ideologically supported and promulgated by the government, gave rise to new individual, private initiatives in rural society (Reichert 1993: 48). This had two major consequences in the economy of the villages: on the one hand the mechanization and growth of agriculture beyond the sphere of state-controlled agricultural cooperatives and the development of small-scale industries in rural centres; on the other, independent initiatives fostered by labour migration to the Arab countries. This implied that for the first time in history, poor landless peasants were also given the opportunity of saving and accumulating capital alongside wealthier farmers, land owners and the educated elite. After the 70s, even those living in the most deprived areas of the country had the chance to change their situation using their own initiative and action, and thus take an active part in the new consumer culture. The pressure to migrate was increased even further by Mubarak’s latest

⁶ Schielke uses a pseudonym for this village but tells us it is located in the Delta region near the coast where international migration has had a major effect on the economic and social life of villagers (2015:4,7)
agrarian reform in 1992, which penalised self-sustaining peasant families by allowing
landowners to reclaim their land and increase the price of land rent, so much as to triple it.
Research conducted by specialists in Egyptian agriculture revealed that this policy caused
the suddenly landless, indebted and impoverished families whose subsistence was no longer
ensured by agriculture and minor trade, to look for means of survival elsewhere (Posterman
2011; Hinnebusch 2016). Since then, there has been an increase in urban and international
migration and a rising number of rural families have become dependent on the economic
support provided by relatives who have left to work in the major cities (Cairo and
Alexandria), in the tourist resorts of the Sinai peninsula, or abroad.
In the early 2000s, the introduction of national television (Abu-Lughod 2005), satellite TV
and the internet to the Egyptian countryside enabled a wider consumption of Arabic soaps,
pop music, religious video clips, Hollywood movies and European football. “By offering a
greater variety of models for emotion and action” (Schielke 2008: 264), these things have
had an important role in shaping and influencing the collective imagination of the villages,
and people’s aspirations towards belonging to a more urban and cosmopolitan middle class.

Though the promises of modernity and a belief in personal progress have become a
part of everyday aspiration in the rural areas of Egypt, all practical paths of advancement,
both in the public and private sectors, have become regulated by corrupt networks dependent
upon bribes, nepotism, clientelism or the educational capital gained by having attended the
right schools. Therefore, for those whose living depends mainly on agricultural work,
industrial labour and small trade, the path towards a greater economic and social mobility
has become even narrower. While globalization brings the promise of modernity into
everyone’s reach—shaping imaginaries and desires of individual advancement, transcending
class and level of education—the possibilities of materializing these aspirations as a villager
are so meagre as to cause frustration, boredom, anger and contradictory feelings. One
becomes more and more attracted to an imagined life whilst constantly experiencing its
elusiveness. The intertwined processes of globalization and capitalism, which are
fundamentally material in expression, drive the quest for the fulfilment of a seemingly
endless list of desires in a world of deepening social division.
Desiring Milan in Tatoun and Qasabi

Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud all come from rural areas in the northern part of Egypt. Mohamed and Mahmoud, like the majority of the 36 thousand Egyptians living in Milan, come from Tatoun, a town of about 85 thousand residents in the wider province of Faiyum, approximately 150km south west of Cairo. Ali instead, comes from Qasabi, a small village in the Delta region, around 180km north of Cairo, whose young people have mostly migrated to the Gulf countries and a fewer number to Europe. Ali seems to be the only man in the village to have chosen Italy as his destination. When I asked him how young he was when he first started thinking of traveling to Europe, he told me his desire began whilst he was trying to get access to the military academy in Alexandria. He described this moment as the time he became aware of his anger and frustration with the Egyptian government and its system:

This moment, when I finished high school, I presented the paperwork to attend the faculty for pilots, which is the same for the police and similar. In the end you either end up as a policeman or as a captain. It’s not easy to get access, because you need to be one who has close relatives that help him to get in and attend this university. Otherwise (you need to be) one who pays a lot of money, in order to enrol. I didn’t manage to get in because I didn’t pay the money, nor did I have close relatives to help me do this. This is something I hate Egypt for. (Ali, September 2012)

Ali ended up registering himself for a degree in philosophy, but again, he had to come to terms with a corrupt evaluation system:

Also the professors at the university force you to buy their books. If you don’t buy the book, you won’t pass the exam. You buy the book, you simply go to write your name for the exam, you pass the exam directly. Such a bad thing. If one who should be of guidance to the students acts like this, how will the students be then? (ibid)

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7 Data provided by ISTAT, updated in 2015 ([http://www.comuni-italiani.it/statistiche/stranieri/eg.html](http://www.comuni-italiani.it/statistiche/stranieri/eg.html) accessed on March 12, 2017)
Ali’s remarks show quite clearly his mistrust towards institutions of the state and those who represent them as being unfit to serve as a model to the younger generation.

Like Ali, many young men from the Delta region of Egypt move to the second greatest city of the country, Alexandria, in search of better working opportunities or in order to get a degree and enhance their chances of getting better jobs in the future. But yet again, there are other obstacles to prevent the development of their achievements within the labour market:

Perhaps two people graduate the same year, and the first gets 90% and the second gets 60%. But if the second guy has the money to pay, or has an important family supporting him and helping him to get a job, he will get a much better job and much more quickly. The other one might never find work and spend his entire day drinking tea at the café. This is something I don’t like, and that annoys me a lot, in Egypt. There’s no justice, no rights at all. Maybe after the revolution things have changed, but I don’t believe they have. (ibid)

This last sentence, echoing Mohamed’s embittered words during the elections, is charged with Ali’s disillusionment towards the potential of the situation changing after the revolution.

In the pre-revolutionary setting of the rural town of Nazlat-al-Rayyis, Schielke also describes his friends as spending most of their time resting in bed at home, in front of the television, drinking tea at cafes, or Internet cafes. When lucky enough to be employed in a state job, they carry out these monotonous shifts in boredom, feeling dissatisfied and hopeless as the salaries are still extremely low and there is no sense of advancement or change in their lives. No matter how much people’s social and personal imaginaries have been inhabited by ideals and the hopes of progress and mobility, their lived experience is often felt as ineffective and immobile. “The more progress, the more boredom”, one of Schielke’s interlocutors paradoxically states (2008: 258). These descriptions resonate with what Ghassan Hage has termed an “existential immobility”, when he worked with diasporic families in two rural villages of Lebanon (2005). Other scholars researching the narratives of migrants in rural and suburban Morocco (Vacchiano 2007; Pandolfo 2007; Hannoum 2009) have reported similar accounts of a frustrated, wasted life by migrants and migrants-to-be. For example, in the Maghreb, the term used to define the experience of border crossing, l-harg, means “the burning” and also refers “to a heterogeneous configuration relating to the figure of a “burned” life - a life without name, and without legitimacy; a life
of enclosure in physical, genealogical and cultural spaces perceived as uninhabitable” (Pandolfo 2007: 333). It is in order to avoid burning out due to this existential immobility, as Hage would put it, that people start fantasizing about possible lives elsewhere. Life has a ‘taste’, as his Lebanese interlocutors would put it, and a meaning as long as one has a sense of a trajectory, a sense of ‘going somewhere’. In many languages, as in English, when we want to find out if someone is well, we ask “how is it going?” meaning “how is life going?”. In fact, there seems to be this common understanding that life goes well and one is happy as long as there is this sense of socio-existential movement. This sense of movement is something a revolution can also bring into being in a nation perceived as economically and sociopolitically stagnant for the majority of the population. When people experience a crisis in ‘their sense of existential mobility’ they decide to move physically, and by any means necessary and available. Without taking into account this inverse relationship between physical and existential mobility, Hage argues we would be unable to understand the movement we call migration. What is more is that this relationship allows us to reconstruct the social imaginaries related to mobility: “within a whole social physics of socio-existential mobility, explaining different kinds of mobility rather than homogenizing them with one term that equates the travel of the totally-at-home-having-fun tourist and the travel of the fragile, dislocated and hesitant refugee” (2005: 471). The traumatic experiences of migration coincide with the action people have taken to move in order to change their situation, and they end up, once again, feeling trapped in a life without possibility.

After being repeatedly disappointed in being unable to reach his aspirations in Egypt, Ali started to consider Italy as his only chance of speeding up a process that would otherwise take forever. All he wanted was to get a degree so that he could shorten his military service (which is still compulsory for young men in Egypt), get a passport, and find a job that would enable him to leave the country as soon as possible. Having tried first to move to the city and remain in his own country, the other two viable alternatives, which his fellow villagers also fantasized about, were the countries of the Gulf or Europe. The Arab cities of the Gulf represented something more familiar and closer to home because of the continuity in language, religion and certain aspects of culture, but the working conditions that migrants reported back described exploitation and the abuse of power by employers. In Ali’s words:

You are always under someone’s control, depending on what he wishes. If he tells you ‘today you stay at home’, you have to stay at home, if he tells you ‘today there’s
no work’, then there’s no work and you have to stay at home. You can’t work for yourself, and you have no control over your situation. (ibid)

Italy, as he described it to me, was the country that occupied his imaginative horizon, not just for the possibility of getting a job that would offer him better economic return, but Italy, and Milan specifically, represented for him a place of human rights, culture, freedom and fashion. All aspects of a socio-political milieu that had to be reached by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Although Mohamed and Mahmoud had moved to Cairo for work, Tatoun, their hometown, had an established history conditioned by thousands of people having migrated to Italy. The first people to leave, in the 1990s, were mostly young men, who managed throughout the years to get their legal statuses recognised. In turn, this enabled them to help other relatives to migrate thanks to the existing network which gave them financial support for their travel expenses, and provided logistical support in terms of finding a job and receiving shelter.

This helps to forge a sense of locality (Ghannam 1998) and community, but also works in creating further pressure and control on migrants, dictating in a sense that work and sending back remittances to their family and the village should remain the main purpose for migrating. When visiting their families on holiday back home, the ones who have achieved their legal papers in Italy drive private cars (still a luxury for most Egyptians) with Italian plates, buy land and re-invest their earnings in building new properties. In the meantime their families look for brides and inform them on the needs of the household. This continued interaction between migrants and their families forges a sense of locality and of belonging, which Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud feel they need, but not without ambivalence.8

Migrants’ remittances and the outer world of possibility is having an enormous impact on the collective imagination. In Tatoun especially, this is clearly visible in the changing architecture of the town. There are new buildings everywhere; every year there is another floor added to what has already been built. One floor for each sibling, and the

8 Mainly because of the difficulty of returning, the pressure of meeting expectations and their sense of being split between a past and future life, in a present which is often not promising at all. Chapter 2 goes into this issue in greater detail.
last, normally, reserved for the one funding the construction from the opposite shore of the Mediterranean. The visual horizon is red brick in colour.

Figure 1.1 Building sites in the town of Tatoun
Figure 1.2 Completed and decorated building, Tatoun

Figure 1.3 The market at Tatoun, surrounded by building sites

9 Photograph by LAURA CUGUSI © 2009
Schielke and Graw (2012) suggest that the images of newly built houses thanks to the remittances of migrants is as iconic of contemporary migration as the image of poorly built boats, which has become so pervasive and a “standard feature in the news and in cultural production about migration” in Europe (2012: 8). Yet they argue that while the latter is not helpful in explaining people’s individual and collective motivations to venture on such journeys, the houses built by migrants—an image very rarely taken into consideration by European perception—is the most palpable and convincing effect of migration for those who live in the vicinity. The act of building a house with one’s labour away from home is an almost universal practice performed by emigrants. They reproduce a specific type of presence in their villages of origin by investing economically through this construction, which they might never even return to in order to inhabit themselves (Dalakoglou 2010).

In this way, families that are financially supported by one or more members who have been economically successful in Milan are clearly demarcated and differentiated from the rest. Six floors buildings stand next to humble barracks with chickens and goats on the rooftops or in the courtyard. In Tatoun and Qasabi, most likely as much as satellite television, what constitutes today’s imaginary are these construction sites: the vision of migrants driving past with their shiny cars, their hands full of gifts from Europe, wearing golden jewellery and designer clothes.

Mohamed and Mahmoud’s older relatives came to Milan when the policies of migration allowed more movement, less risk and less money to make the journey. After the 90s, European borders became tougher to cross and international migration became a harder choice to make, as after the Schengen agreement in 1991, travelling visas were granted only to few of the upper middle class and educated elite. But the longing for the world (the world beyond and outside) in rural towns such as Tatoun continued and became perhaps even more pervasive (Giangrande and Piscitelli 2013). Transnational networks presented the opportunity of leaving the country with ever greater urgency, as it was perceived as the only valid alternative to remaining stuck in the village. As Mahmoud would say, “the ears and eyes of envy” in seeing and hearing about those who had succeeded overseas motivated brothers, nephews, cousins and neighbours to conceptualize their future, and their life in general, as only viable through migration. Even when this implied crossing borders and the Mediterranean Sea illegally on life-threatening journeys. Mohamed and Mahmoud often told me: “For us it was best to die at sea, whilst trying to achieve a better life, than dying slowly,
day by day, with no prospects in our villages”, echoing many other friends who had also crossed the sea on makeshift boats. In the crossing too, my interlocutors saw a righteous act of defiance against the limiting and unjust conditions of their livelihoods, so much as to ascribe the title of shahid to travellers who had lost their lives in the journey.
Chapter Two
Giving Form to Imaginary Lifeworlds: from migratory imagination to experience and back

*I don’t think a place where you can’t be who you want to be can be called ‘home’. So, where is our place? Where is ‘home’?* - Mohamed, November 2012

In recent years, the topic of migration has attracted more and more public attention and concern. Graw and Schielke note “it has become impossible to think about the contemporary world without thinking about migration as well”, something we are witnessing in academia through an exponential rise in published literature, funded research and specialized conferences analysing the topic from multiple disciplinary perspectives (2012: 7). Over the past 30 years anthropology has predominantly studied the broader field of migration through the concepts of identity and ethnicity (Brettell 2015). During the 1970s and 80s the anthropology of migration was particularly characterized by studies of ethnic identity among migrants, and its maintenance, construction, or reproduction. From the 1990s onwards, although maintaining an interest in ethnicity, anthropology’s attention was directed more and more towards transnationalism. The transnational turn in the anthropology of migration could be depicted as a change in ‘direction’, making a clear departure from previous analyses of groups in specifically bounded localities to deterritorialized groups, to use Appadurai’s expression (1991), and their activities as they engage in social and existential processes and practices that develop across borders and multi-locally. As people move to follow specific social networks and family ties that extend their sense of belonging to more than one place, Vertovec has noticed that the direction of analysis has also moved from ‘here’ to ‘here-and-there’ (2007: 968). Vertovec incites us to use a multi-scalar approach, providing Michael Peter Smith, a political scientist who observes how migrants engage politically at different levels, in places of origin and destination, as an example. These transnational migrant practices and other aspects of dual citizenship present a challenge “for concepts of national identity and for citizenship itself” (ibid: 971). Through contextual analysis and ethnographic descriptions, Smith (1992; 1998; 2001) discussed
how the identities and experiences of migrants reproduce ‘contingencies of time and circumstance’\(^\text{10}\) related to their multiple social locations and multi-positionality.

The research I conducted with Mohamed, Mahmoud and Ali sheds some light on how my participants enter into dialogue with the social and emotional realities they physically left behind, and how this affects their perceptions of who they are, who they have become and the purpose of their actions in the past, the present and the future. By looking more closely at how movement has created and continues to create highly complex and fluid imaginaries of one’s place in the world, social scientists may come to understand how one’s knowledge and interpretation of life events become influenced by more than just social, economic and political discourses reproduced in specific localities. In fact, the socioeconomic and political causes and repercussions of migration have been the primary focus of critical analysis on the phenomenon up until the 80s. This perspective still remains as the major characteristic of public debate.

While these topics are undeniably important to consider, a growing number of scholars (Ghannam 1998; Jackson 2008, 2012, 2013; Schielke 2008, 2015; Schielke and Graw 2012; De Boeck 2012; Gaibazzi 2012; Pandolfo 2007; Piot 2010; Lucht 2012) have argued for more culturally and historically sensitive accounts to complement previous research on the subjective and existential causes and repercussions of migratory processes. A turn towards the personal and existential dimensions, the expectations and experiences of migration, can shed light upon the different ways in which experiences of traveling and attempts of re-settling have taken form through social and personal imaginaries. By social imaginaries I mean what the political philosopher Charles Taylor has poignantly and succinctly defined as not being a set of ideas, but “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of society” (2002: 91). According to Taylor, the social imaginary is unlike theoretical constructs of social reality in the sense that it is “shared by large groups of people, if not the whole of society” (ibid: 106) and is formed and reiterated in popular images, stories, myths and legends. However, I argue that in order to better understand how individuals make their choices, interact with each other, understand themselves and the world around them, we need to take into account their biographies and imaginative inner lives as the ways they retell their stories allow space for often unlaced and unfinished thoughts, interrupted inner speech, and existential

\(^{10}\) in Vertovec 2002: 972
dilemmas. Without an insight into these realms we will not be able to understand against what personal and social, or more aptly global (Schielke and Graw 2012) horizons migrants measure their choices, experiences and perceptions.

This is the reason I chose to engage with my participants’ own retelling and conceptualizing of their experiences. Instead of introducing them as objects of broader and structural socioeconomic and political analysis, the current research began and was carried out as a shared endeavour, where theoretical questioning and critique is incited by dialogue and by the words and existential dilemmas that emerge in Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s narrations.

On presence and absence

Before starting my fieldwork practice with Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in Milan, I spent a couple of months in Egypt in the summer of 2012, to learn the basics of colloquial Egyptian Arabic as I believed necessary to become more familiar with my participants’ mother tongue. During our creative process, my positioning as a student of their language prompted my informants to teach me the lyrics to their favourite songs, or expressions derived from popular stories and proverbs. Though they shared some of their thoughts in their mother tongue, our communication was mediated through Italian, their language of acquisition and one of my mother tongues. The reason for this could be that I was not a fluent speaker of Arabic, but it was most probably in continuity with our previous relationship within Asnada and Fandema\(^\text{11}\), which had seen me in the role of their Italian language and theatre ‘teacher’ and they as my ‘students’. My visit to Egypt set out the beginning of our research and a new phase in our relationship, where often the roles would shift as I learned about their expressions and worldviews, and they asked me to facilitate their communication in texts or performances in Italian. While I was in Egypt I also met members of their families and visited their villages in order to get a sense of the social and imaginary world my friends often made reference to. However, I realised their relatives and neighbours were also seeing in me as an incarnation of the world Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud migrated to, and would not refrain from using my unexpected presence to find out more about their lives. This

\(^{11}\) An Italian language school and community theatre company which I describe in greater detail in the Introduction to Part II
encounter took place in a very specific historical moment in the lives of my informants, which is worth highlighting here, as they were still unable to travel and lacked the legal papers that would ensure their stay in Italy without risking detention and deportation. This added an emotional intensity to my visit to their villages, and on my return my friends were also eager to hear my account and see the pictures and videos I had captured. My journey to visit their places of origin was perceived by them as a sign of my intention to come closer to their lived experience and their stories. The fact that Ali or Mahmoud could refer to something or someone I had met myself in Egypt acted as a catalyst for stories, and drew me closer to parts of their imaginary world occupied by their homeland. In the narrations that emerged, the relationship to their neighbourhoods of origin was often expressed by a contrast between their imaginative and emotional presence on one hand, and their physical and temporal absence on the other.

Figure 2.1 *My neighbourhood in Qasabi* - Kafr Sheikh, Nile Delta region – Egypt (Ali, August 2012)
Ali left Qasabi at the end of 2006, and only seven and a half years later did he manage to return for the first time. When I went to meet his family, I brought the above map with me. It represented his memory of the place but mostly traced his presence by naming places and people that belong to that part of his history. The other life, as he would put it. A life that in his mind still went on, somehow in parallel, somehow in contrast to the life here, in Italy. The familiar places are marked by the Italian possessive adjective “mio” (my) or “nostro” (our) as in casa di un mio migliore amico (house of one of my best friend), caffetteria mia (my cafeteria), moschea “mia preghiera” (“my prayer” mosque), negozi nostri (our shops), la nostra via (our street). The use of the possessive pronoun “mio” was a clear indication of how strongly Ali’s sense of belonging was connected to the place he had drawn from his memory. In the centre of the paper he had drawn his family house, where he has placed himself io – meaning I - in brackets. There is an interesting tension between what the map represents, an existing place in Egypt, and the Italian terms used by Ali to express his biographical and emotional connection to his hometown. I wondered if Ali looked at his experience from within this space ‘in between’, reproduced in the map and bringing together his adopted language and place of origin. Our exchange of stories, words and (mis)understandings also took place in this space between.

In Egypt, I followed the map around the neighbourhood with Bostamy, Ali’s closest brother, and we met many of their friends and relatives. His sisters and cousins came with their children to meet me at their family home. They all asked about Ali’s news, wanting to know how I thought he was doing, what I thought of his new Italian girlfriend, and why on earth he was not calling so often anymore. Bostamy, who is slightly older than Ali, has become the head of the family after their father died. Since finishing university, he managed to secure a governmental job teaching French at a middle school in Qasabi, which just about managed to cover the costs of survival. Thanks to the extra income provided by small trading business he arranged from time to time he managed to take care of their widowed mother and the house, to marry off the younger sisters and brothers and to deal with the few family businesses their father, who was a trader, passed on to them. Their father had been economically very successful, owning animals, pieces of land, houses and shops. Then toward the end of his life, after lending his land to parts of the extended family, his relatives took advantage of his ill health and he started to lose control over his belongings. The only things left were the cafeteria, which is still running, and a shop, which was no longer in use.
Bostamy told me that he and his brother Ali dreamed of recovering their father’s wealth and expanding the family business even further as they had learned the trade since being young. But Ali saw more possibilities abroad, and, as mentioned before, he was growing restless and intolerant with Egypt’s corrupt administration and felt frustrated by the lack of opportunities for them to grow. Bostamy said:

He left because he had a greater vision for us in his head. He had the impression that he would have more freedom in Italy and that he could realise something greater, that he wouldn’t be able to do here in Egypt. (August 2012)

I felt impelled to ask him if he remembered the days before Ali left. “How can I forget them…” he replied:

They were black days. Because I knew that after that, I would not see him again. Of course, I also experienced all the hope and fear he was feeling. But this is a painful conversation for me to have…

Bostamy hesitated for a moment, as though he feared what he was about to say would open an old wound:

Ali doesn’t want to come back now because he thinks that the others here will judge him as a failure. But, what has Ali done in these 6 years? Nothing. I even had to send him money once. And I was also the one who had to pay for his decision to abandon the ship to stay in Italy. It cost 30 thousand Egyptian pounds.12 I had agreed to this, because I also believed in his project. But now I think that if he had stayed we would have done big things together.

Then he looked around and said in a voice full of sadness:

12 Almost £3000 (GBP).
Look what Ali has lost! He has lost his best friends, his family, his own home, his village... If God would only allow it, I would exchange the last 6 years Ali has lost in Italy with half of the life that remains for me to live.

Possibly as a way of making amends for the impossible wish he just expressed, Bostamy dug his hands into a box of old photographs from which he picked one with some reluctance, as though exhuming the memory of a time when both brothers were together, a time when the thought or even the idea of separation was still very distant.

Figure 2.2 Bostami (left) and Ali (right). Source: Ali’s family in Qasabi.
Between ‘Here’ and ‘There’: The entanglement of roots and routes

If a progressive and modern outlook on the world can give us the impression that life is moving forward, Kierkegaard would argue that “life can only be understood backwards” (1843).

If the conditions of Ali’s journey and experience in Italy had been different, Bostamy might not have described the last days with his brother as “black days”. In his own words, we can trace a sense of a future that was already troubling him at the time of Ali’s departure. Many emotions have a particular connection to time: for instance, hopeful thoughts project us toward the future, while regret expresses what we feel about past experiences or missed opportunities. Worry, as expressed in my interlocutors’ words, occupies a strange temporality, where possible futures interrogate present situations and past actions. Bostamy worried mostly about his brother’s loss of time, money, significant relationships and shared opportunities, all attributes of a life located in the place Ali had left behind. His older brother believed Ali had sacrificed his ties to that place and to his people by dreaming of “something greater”. But the map Ali had drawn for me told a different story. Paradoxically, despite his absence, the possessive pronouns he repeatedly inscribed onto the map trace his sense of belonging, a type of presence through absence (Sartre 199613).

By moving from home to here to where? (Braziel and Mannur 2003) many people who have experienced migration remain haunted by an uncertain relation to origin and place which calls for a radical change in what Malkki (1992) calls “sedentarist” ways of thinking and acting: a view of the world that values roots, place and order over mobility and fluidity. However, to give more of our analytical attention to routes does not imply we should ignore how people relate to their roots or conceptualise their places of origin. In fact, it is in the entanglement of roots and routes that the term “origin” stops signifying something fixed and graspable, and comes closer to Ali’s experience, using Walter Benjamin’s definition of “that which emerges out of a process of becoming and disappearing.”14

Ali often referred to his double life, expressing a sense of being divided into two, the life of the past and the life of the future; the life as a young man in Egypt with his family and friends and the life as a grown up adult in Italy. But, most importantly, the life he was

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13 In Irving 2007: 197
14 In Dobson 2004: 63
not living physically, the other life overseas in Egypt, would come to haunt him whenever
the life in Milan was particularly difficult and frustrating, whenever he felt the possibilities
in the “new” life, as an undocumented migrant, had shrunk terribly. By listening to migrants’
narratives in France, the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad had already identified this
existential dynamic by pertinently terming it “the double absence”, referring simultaneously
to the impossibility of the immigrant to become entirely a part of the host society, and to the
loss of proximity and severance of familial ties back in his place of origin. Sayad treats
immigration as a “total social fact” that needs to be looked at through a double prism, as an
immigrant is at the same time an emigrant, and:

one cannot write on the sociology of immigration without, at the same time and by
that very fact, outlining a sociology of emigration. One country’s immigration is
another country’s emigration. The two are indissociable aspects of a single reality,
and one cannot be explained without reference to the other. (2004(1999): 1)

Past anthropological research mainly set its analysis in host countries (see Glick-
Schiller, Bach and Blanc 1995; Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Glick Schiller 2005; Glick Schiller
and Çağlar 2010), but, as necessary to the understanding of the complexities of migration,
there has been a recent proliferation of studies looking at the phenomenon from the sending
countries (Vacchiano 2007; Schielke 2008, 2015; Graw 2012; Gaibazzi 2012, 2015; Elliot
2012),

“No place like home”

The suffering of the immigrant consists in the fragmentation of the self which is
characteristic of migration and a side-product of modernity (Bauman 201315). Instead of
feeling integrated into a new social reality, feeling a part of political discourse and policies
in the receiving country, one ends up feeling more and more disintegrated.16 Ali once told
me of how a friend of his who had already migrated warned him about a dilemma he would

15 In a interview with Reset DOC (May 18, 2011), an Italian online journal specializing in issues related to
intercultural dialogue.
16 I am indebted to the writer and storyteller Tahar Lamri, who used this expression during a conference in
Ferrara in summer 2011, to describe how he felt being an Algerian migrant to Italy in the late 1980s.
have to face once in Italy; a dilemma his friend saw as being regulated by a certain acceptance or resistance to change:

'My friend called me on the phone while I was still in Egypt, thinking about leaving. He told me: ‘Out of three people who migrate to a country with a different culture to their own, only one of them suffers. The person that always stays the same, that never decides to change, that is always fighting against change. This one doesn’t suffer… maybe a little, but not much. The person that changes everything doesn’t suffer either, because he stays in the other country, he changes and becomes another person. Instead the person that is a bit here and a bit there, he is the one who suffers. He is undecided. Shall I stay here or shall I become like that?’ This is what he told me… You need to decide one thing: you either change or you stay as you are. (September 2012, during reflective feedback after the theatre workshop)

But then ironically, and perhaps not unexpectedly, Ali’s experience as an undocumented migrant in Italy for many years made him feel trapped between two extremes, neither here nor there, or in more than one life at once.

The aim here is to problematise the hegemonic and developmental notions of “belonging” and “home”, contrasting, as previously (D’Onofrio 2008), the public and highly mediatised understanding of “the migrant” and of “migration” with the existential dilemmas and imagination within the narratives my participants make themselves.

There is much talk about ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ in the discourse of NGOs and international European organisations who set up educational and social projects in the “sending” areas of so-called developing countries aimed at deterring migration. These projects are also paralleled by campaigns in destination countries with the aim of encouraging migrants to voluntarily return ‘home’. Many of the below images have appeared as posters in tube stations, bus stops, call centres or distributed as leaflets where migrants tend to gather.
Figure 2.3 I want to return home, IOM poster\textsuperscript{17} with support of the European Union

Figure 2.4 Thinking of home? – IOM banner\textsuperscript{18} with support of the Australian Government


\textsuperscript{18} Source: Australian Government’s Department of Immigration and Border Protection website: https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Refu/Illegal-maritime-arrivals/voluntary-returns
Figure 2.5 Thinking of Home? Voluntary return can help you get there – French federal agency Fedasil poster

Figure 2.6 Si estás pensando en regresar… (if you’re thinking to return…) Poster from Spain’s 2008 voluntary return policy

20 Source: https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2009/03/02/spains-voluntary-return-policy/
Popular phrases such as “better to help them at home”, “if the conditions in their countries weren’t so bad, do you think they would come?” and “no place like home” (applied to this discourse) are often contradicted by the narratives of those who have migrated and who are thinking of migrating, who feel an increasing urgency to belong to a globalised world where one’s life has more possibilities. Mohamed’s thought-provoking reaction to such common developmental discourses might be particularly efficient in illuminating this.

One evening at the end of November 2012, I asked Mohamed and Mahmoud to join me at an event organized by Save the Children showing a new audio-visual project they recently produced in Italy that was meant for young people in the Egyptian sending areas. _The Italianaire_ was created by mixing animation and documentary interviews in the form of a quiz game, aesthetically attractive for young people and thematically targeting the illegal migration of minors. Several Egyptian teenagers were in the audience, as guests of Save the Children’s reception centres for unaccompanied minors. Also present were some ten to fifteen people from similar organisations associated with socio-educational work with migrants, or members of the Muslim Solidarity centre.

Aware of Mahmoud and Mohamed’s experience of illegal crossing as minors, my intention was to see how they would react to the content of the project and to the discussion that followed. During the final debate, when the conversation began to deal with the question of whether the life of an undocumented young migrant in Italy was worth all the sacrifice and trouble, an Egyptian facilitator, who had grown up in Milan as a second generation migrant, commented: “Well quite frankly, there’s no place like your own home, is there?”

Mohamed, who had listened to the whole discussion quite restlessly, felt the urge to intervene:

But then we should ask ourselves ‘what is home?’ I have been asking myself this question all the time. If that was “home” for us, we would not have felt the urge to leave it. In fact, I don’t think a place where you can’t be who you want to be can be called ‘home’. So, where is our place? Where is ‘home’?

Hage would also pick up on Mohamed’s questions, reflecting on the “ingredients” he has identified in making a place ‘homely’, namely: security, familiarity, community and a sense
of possibility, the latter being perhaps the most interesting and most neglected factor in the theorization of home belonging. “[A] home,” Hage argues, “has to be a space open for opportunities and hope” (1997: 3). Recalling Mohamed’s intervention, Hage would agree that in order to feel at ‘home’, it is crucial that one is able to perceive the opportunities of a better life. For this reason “homely structures are more an aspired entity, an ideal goal that guides practices of home-building, than an existing reality” (1997: 4) and one is propelled to keep moving, to continue research which might never be satisfied.

Mohamed’s thorny reflection created significant dismay among the group leading the discussion, motivating them to a very predictable, moralistic and easy conclusion: “Illegal migration is bad (for you and your family). Italy is no Eldorado, especially if you haven’t got the documents, so better stay put and develop your future in your home country, where you belong.”

I found it uncomfortable to listen to the discussion myself and felt very uneasy about the fact that both the short film and the facilitator leading the debate kept imposing the problems of illegal migration and its so-called discontents upon the minors and their supposed naivety. Speaking after Mohamed, I supported the desire for anyone to search for their own place in the world and began to question the speakers and the audience on why the political responsibilities (for example of turning what would normally be a journey into a deathly sea crossing) had been ignored so far. At that point Mahmoud stepped into the conversation and said:

I would like to say one thing: we did not set off as migrants. We left our country for a journey, an adventure. It is only after that it turned into migration.

In order to understand what Mahmoud and Mohamed were trying to say that evening, we need to take into account their outlook on the world, their subjective experiences and their imaginative lifeworlds. In the previous chapter we saw how certain imaginaries already permeated into the everyday lives of those living in rural villages, like those of Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud, and how “the burning desire” (Vacchiano 2007; 2016) of “taking to the sea” has become so urgent in making migration the only viable possibility for life to move on. The imaginative horizon facilitated by migration starts well before the actual journey takes place and it doesn’t just affect the people who then physically venture the crossing, but also

21 Take to the Sea is also name of a collective journalistic/artistic project on Tatoun, by Lina Attalah, Laura Cugusi and Nida Mariam.

So what happens when migrants-to-be take the decision and act upon it? How do they experience that moment and what imaginations take place in their minds? In the following section of this chapter I will take a closer look at the act of crossing, and why I define it as a ‘critical’ event from a phenomenological and existential point of view. In the usual manner of this thesis, I will begin with individual stories and the narration of the protagonists themselves in order to build into theoretical arguments that need to be grounded in questions which intersubjectively emerge in conversation and creative processes, of which an analysis will follow in the second half of the thesis.

The Journey

*Where does the sea end? – Mohamed*

The present research carries out an existential and methodological investigation into Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud’s perceptions of the future and their imaginative ‘lifeworlds’ (Jackson 2012), by focusing on the influences these intangible realms have on the narrations of lived experiences. Experiences are not just features belonging only to our past. Andrew Irving (2008) and Michael Jackson (1996) provoke us to turn our common use of the term “experience” back to its etymology, where the prefix *ex* indicates the direction ‘out of’ and *peira* means ‘attempt, trial, test’. Moreover, Jackson notes that *peira* shares the same root ‘per’ as the Germanic *fahr*, which means ‘to travel’. Such etymological considerations lead us to observe that:

Experience therefore rather than being concerned with the past is also orientated towards the present and the future and implies a type of movement towards something not yet known or experienced, rather than simply something retrospective (Irving 2008: 6).
Rising from this consideration, the ethnographic examples presented in this section aim to show how the imagined future, ingrained in the experiences of moving and crossing the Mediterranean, become almost tangible in the daily chores, plans, actions and storytelling of migrants. Though out of reach for those who perceive themselves as never quite settled, the future plays a crucial role in providing a sense of direction and expectation. It is through the existential possibilities of certain imagined futures that migrants often redefine who they are and ascribe new meanings to their past and present circumstances. Therefore, I argue that in order to understand people’s experiences, we need to reach beyond what is readily accessible, as informants often describe intangible phenomena existing outside of the realms of ordinary perception, which disrupt the linear structure of narrative and the temporal ordering of events. Sometimes a past experience becomes a re-interpretation of a desired future and, a present hardship provokes a revision of past decisions and of future expectations, which redefine whole life purposes and trajectories.

Movement and journeys have greatly affected the realms of both social and individual imaginations in particular ways. It is worth pointing out that migration, movement and mobility are variously imagined in Africa and in Europe (and of course elsewhere) and that, lately, ethnographers have been keen to detail the myriad of ways in which this is so. Todd Sanders (2001), for example, notes that anthropologists have done a lot to contribute to the exploration of the many ways in which these imaginings are formed. “By imaginings” he says:

[...] anthropologists do not mean that such things are culturally-concocted fantasies that can therefore be ignored. On the contrary, many anthropologists today see such imaginings as crucial to understanding migratory processes. This is because people’s ideas about movement are not just ways of thinking about the world. They also provide ways to act upon that world. Cultural imaginations, to use Clifford Geertz’s terminology, are both models ‘of’ and models ‘for’ reality.

(Ibid: 28)

Ali’s dream was to travel around the world on a ship and become a trader, just like his father. A graduate in Philosophy at the University of Alexandria, Ali started working as a helmsman and night guard on a cargo ship. After a couple of voyages to Greece, when the captain announced they would be making their first trip to Italy, Ali took the decision to go without telling his family. He had always dreamed of walking the streets of Milan, dressed
in the best designer clothes he could imagine, but more importantly, Milan would open up many opportunities for him, allowing him to get a job that would re-establish a certain social and economic status for his family after his father’s death, and enabling him to help his mother to cope with bringing up and educating his younger siblings. After the information about this trip to Italy, Ali decided he would not return this time. Before leaving that night, he kissed his mother on the forehead without waking her up, and on his way out, the only thing he picked up were his travel sickness tablets. Since it was going to be his last journey by ship for a long time, he wanted to be lucid and able to reflect on what was the right decision to make:

Shall I go or not? In the end I decided to go. I prepared my suitcase when my mum was sleeping. I hugged her, and I kissed her forehead, and left at five o’clock in the morning. I took the train that goes to the port of Alexandria, with my brother. At 6am we were in front of the port of Alexandria. Now I have to leave and I don’t know when I’ll be back. Because I knew that my journey will be long. I looked into his eyes and I saw tears, “my favourite brother” was crying… I hugged him and I entered the door of my other life. For me it was very difficult to leave the country, the family and the real friendship, it was a lovely life! But I had to leave.

I looked for the ship where I had to work and I found it in the port. It was very big, white and blue. The moment I put my foot on the ladder of the ship that brought me to Italy, I knew… that was my first step in my new life. I said farewell to my brother, and that was the last thing I did. I climbed up the ladder. As soon as I passed the door… that was it! I had to meet […] new people, I had another life. While before the responsibility for your life was also of the people who looked after you, now you are you, you are everything. You will be the one to worry about your life, nobody else will.

And I don’t want to forget that the first week was very difficult for me, the work, the thoughts, the headaches, and especially the bad treatment. Now I am used to this new life, but I miss my family too much: mum, and my dad who always comes to me in my dreams, because he died almost a month before my journey.  

The act of reaching the other side of the Mediterranean by boat may be a life changing experience in itself. Mohamed and Mahmoud also left the country against the will of their parents, even though, as previously discussed, taking the decision to cross from Libya in makeshift boats has been a socially and imaginatively accepted and fostered possibility in Tatoun since the early 90s. Mohamed left on a school day in November 2004. Once he had made his decision, his mother contacted a cousin of hers to keep an eye on him until he boarded the boat and to put him in contact with a trustworthy smuggler. He was 17 then. His father accompanied him all the way to the border. The last time Mohamed glanced at him, the wrinkles on his forehead seemed to have deepened, out of what could have been worry, fear, fatigue or disapproval. He nodded his head and said, as if it were a prophecy: “You won't find what you’re looking for there…” Two days later Mohamed landed on the shores of Sicily with 204 other Egyptian young men who had crossed the Mediterranean Sea by boat. He was one of five underage passengers on that trip and they all came from the same town, Tatoun.

In conversation, my interlocutors often refer to their border-crossing experience as a pivotal moment that split their lives into two very distinct existential moments, which also emerged in Ali’s story: life before the crossing and the one that unfolded thereafter. Each portion contained its own imaginative and experiential possibilities.

**Border Crossings**

Basing my considerations on the autobiographical stories of Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud, this research considers the Mediterranean crossing to be a critical event and transition (Das 1997; Badiou 1988; Kapferer 2010; Jackson 2012), a turning point (Lucht 2012) in the lives of the travellers. An atypical event such as this creates a rupture in the structured normalities of travellers, offering an opportunity or imposing an obstacle in their attempts to reach certain existential objectives. Such life-changing experiences trigger people’s imaginary worlds to become manifest in very particular ways. An “event” in Badiou’s understanding, creates a scission (between who is for and against, who goes and who doesn’t, etc.) and is also a matter of decision that involves ‘naming the impossible’ (1988). In a more socio-political sense, according to Badiou, an event allows the socially excluded to become visible (in our setting, suffice it to think of the hyper-mediatised image of the overcrowded boats,
which have become the hegemonic visual metaphor for illegal migration), and to challenge the existing order of things, which sometimes leads to new perspectives and forms of social, cultural and political action. Border crossings are physically but also imaginatively ‘moving’ experiences, not just for the travellers but also for host populations who react to the arrivals and to the shipwrecks (mostly as represented through the media) in a variety of ways, which make claims over national, political and cultural identities. The focus of this study is to look at how these types of journeys are lived and narrated through the subjective imagination of the protagonists.

Like Michael Jackson’s work with Sierra Leonean migrants (2008), my fieldwork has considered how migrants’ imaginative possibilities become particularly fervent during critical transitions and have a hold on their immediate reality. The almost palpable possibilities that unfold in front of people standing at a crossroad determine the way they will feel about what will happen next and the choices they will make. Whether directed by chance or by a conscious decision, the stronger the ‘irreality’ of those possibilities, or impossibilities, the more passionately these will take over present perceptions of self and worldviews.

Having acknowledged this, how do these possibilities affect people’s actions and decisions in crucial moments? How does it affect the way they re-interpret their own life trajectory (from present to past and then to future)?

The relationship between so-called reality and our images of what lies beyond the horizon is one of ‘interdependence’ (Crapanzano 2004), because as much as dreams, projections, calculations and prophecies may give form to ‘the beyond’, the images that are created also form and inform people’s experiences. What is particularly interesting about this dialectical relationship is the role played by what lies beyond the horizon:

- the possibilities it opens up to us, the licit or illicit desires it provokes, the plays of power it suggests, the dread it can cause – the uncertainty, the sense of contingency, of chance – the exaltation, the thrill of the unknown, it can provoke. (Ibid: 14)

Concurrently, the unreality of these possibilities affects how people reconstruct their autobiographical stories, the interpretation of their immediate experiences and perceptions, and the decisions and actions they put forward.
The crossing is also critical in at least two ways: first because it is described as “important” and “significant” in the narratives of those who experience it, and secondly because through it people undergo a transformation whereby they believe they have achieved a new life and new beginning. By bringing the travellers close to the possibility of losing their lives, the crossing is where existence tests its limits, generating a critical understanding of life’s contingency and uncertainty. “If you’re lucky” or “if it is written in your destiny” and you make it, the journey, as mentioned before, is not merely a strategy for moving physically and geographically, but also “for moving ahead in life, socially and existentially” (Lucht 2012: 136). This was a sense also given by Mohamed after his journey:

I wanted another life, a different life. When I came out of the sea, I knew I would face the real life, the one on land. […] Sometimes difficulties make you stronger. Strong in the sense that they give you courage to move on, to build, to have new thoughts. For me it was like this, really. It was a push, that the sea pushes me towards the land, to move on land, not to stay still.24

Mohamed’s reflections give us an insight into what might traverse someone’s mind when facing the sea, and the kinds of questions about the meaning of life that emerge when the possibility of losing it is so close. At the same time, he is projecting himself towards the future—a mobile future—by contrasting his “new thoughts” and his dream to “move on” to his previous perception of “staying still”, a past he might have described as immobile and with less opportunities.

This echoes Turner’s concept of social drama, as conflict and crisis come to interrupt the continuous flow of social processes, of rituals and performances that mitigate difference into the smooth surface of a shared community. This moment is ‘one of those turning points […] of danger and suspense, when a true state of affairs is revealed’ (Turner 1974: 39) allowing the underlying structures of inequality to emerge. In this sense, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an act of civilisation which attempts to mitigate the disparity between different citizens of the world, recognising everyone’s ‘right to leave

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23 There are specific ways in which notions of ‘luck’ and ‘destiny’ are understood in different societies and by Muslim people (see Wikan 1996; da Col 2012; da Col and Humphrey 2012; De Cillis 2013; Menin 2015; Elliot 2016, to mention a few). Though this thesis does not allow space for an analysis of these concepts, it would be appropriate for me to consider how my participants have understood their choices and experiences in terms of ‘luck’ and ‘destiny’ in a future publication.

24 It was Tomorrow, 51:02 mins.
any country, including his own, and to return to his country’ (Article 13.2). But the true state of affairs, as Turner would put it, is completely different, and this becomes visually and spectacularly apparent with the boat crossings. In Egypt, as in all African states, only some people—including those belonging to the upper and middle classes—are granted traveling visas from the European embassies. The majority of citizens belonging to the poorer working class are denied the right to travel to Europe and are thus forced into the smuggling routes at the risk of their “bare lives” (Agamben 1998). Hence quite understandably, such critical moments are charged with contrasting feelings of excitement, fear, frustration and angst, revealing the power of specific imaginations about the future to cause action or paralysis.

Hage warns us against an uncritical assumption that mobility is characteristic of migration, when in fact migrants may have moved only once or twice in their lives and pass the rest of their days settled in one place. He raises the question of how we can assert there is a specific type of movement so significant in shaping the lives of migrants that differentiates it from the ordinary everyday movement of people in day-to-day life (Hage 2005). The crossing of international borders does not necessarily change people’s worldview. It is clearly the specific ways in which they are crossed that make the crossing a “critical event” in their lives. Even migrants themselves do not always perceive themselves as mobile. The crossing itself may paralyze one’s thoughts, shattering the world that one used to be familiar with. This is similar in the case of Mohamed, who had never even been to the sea before embarking on the boat that took him to Italy:

Where does the sea end? I looked around and asked myself. I felt enclosed, the world that I had studied in our schoolbooks was no longer true. They said we were on Italian waters, but the waters didn’t change its colour. So everything was false! We hadn’t passed borders, or customs. The sea was always the same. I knew from my geography books that the Mediterranean was a sea surrounded by land, but land was nowhere to be seen for hours and hours. All I could see was the water all around us, and the sky above.26

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25 It is important to note here that most illegal border crossing doesn’t actually happen by boat but by passing borders from land or by overstaying visas (see Lucht 2012). Boat crossings have been spectacularised by the media, which might be because they are the most visible and identifiable of all forms of illegal migration, but the Mediterranean route is also, very sadly, the deadliest of all: https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/oct/03/migration-routes-migrants-boat-italian-lampedusa
26 From fieldnotes during our journey and shooting of a documentary in Sicily, July 2014.
So migration is much more than mere movement from one place to another. Not only do migrants-to-be live the unreality of their dreams, desires and fears well before physically moving, thus framing the experience of travel through collective and personal imaginaries before it is actually lived, but by acting within cultural spaces which define understanding through existing discourse, migrants defying border policies are also identified with the specific ways they experienced the border.

According to Foucauldian analysis, orienting ourselves through the affirmation and contestation of different kinds of logic and their accompanying moralities, different discourses are able to coexist within one cultural space. It is through our positioning within these discourses that we understand what fits into the norm and what lies outside of it. According to Foucault, discourses are to be seen as systems that structure the ways in which we perceive reality (Foucault 2002). Thus our perception of the world is structured through discourses that are shaped by media, politics, education and religion at a macro level, but also through discourses within families, professional contexts and circles of friends. If we were to follow Foucault’s argument, we would need to admit that we cannot exist outside of these discourses, no matter how much we may disagree with them. In this sense we can understand how Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud’s experience of illegally crossing highly militarized borders, which are meant to exclude the unwanted “herds” of undocumented migrants, has contributed to creating the story of what they identify with:

When I arrived on land, it was a completely different thing for me, compared to the journey. It was something that I was expecting for a long time. But when I landed I saw some things that I wouldn’t have even imagined. People with cameras… I thought of arriving in a deserted place, where no-one was there. Where I could do whatever I wished. Instead there were so many of them! I didn’t know what offense I had committed… because many policemen were there too. I understood immediately that we were going to appear in the news like criminals.27

To a certain extent, we can argue that how one moves and where one journeys defines who one is (Rossi 2009). As Sarah Green points out, the specific conditions in which people cross borders fundamentally affects their imagination not just of who they are, what they envisage their future to be and what past has led them to the present moment, but also of what the rest

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27 In film rushes of the journey to Sicily and It was Tomorrow, 25:12 mins.
of the world will expect of them and in what ways they will relate to that. In a world where we have to prove our value as human beings by owning the right papers, for those who take on the challenge of travelling without them and to live undocumented, this means becoming second-class citizens; people to whom rights and justice apply less to, and with less human value (Sarah Green 2011). When crossing the Mediterranean and defying border policies, one loses an important part of his or her humanity in some way, as though it slips out of one’s pockets and vanishes into the depths of the sea. This is apparent in the action of burning one’s fingerprints (see D’Onofrio 2008) or of getting rid of one’s identification papers or foreign currency. When Mahmoud’s boat was intercepted by the Italian coastal guard, he told us during a storytelling session that he had some Libyan money on him and that he let them slip below water “as if it was a treasure. Like Rose did in Titanic, where at the end of the film she throws into the sea the jewel that everyone was looking for.” The treasure that the border police in this case normally look for is people’s identity, in order to decide how best to deal with them. If they find migrants’ nationality and age, they either deport them or put them in a reception or detention centre.

Although it is important to notice how mainstream perceptions are influenced by official discourse, to see borders simply as walls that obstruct and exclude is to unilaterally recognise their performative and normative effects and deny the multidimensional ways in which they are re-enforced and contested in practice. From the viewpoint of migrants’ subjective perceptions, borders are understood as porous and malleable, as places of opportunity and possibility where experiences of struggle and peaceful resistance are engendered in opposition to the violence and might of state apparatus.

To acknowledge illegal border crossings as acts of transgression and of “renewal” is to take an epistemic approach (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) to borders as central devices in people’s active articulation of their identities and experiences. Thus, we need to recognise the creative possibilities of migrants’ experiences to re-negotiate, transform and re-write the meaning of border crossing, for:

while experience is shaped by representations, it can also push against these representations – resisting language, bending it in new directions, and distorting the received ways of expressing distress and desperation so that these distortions themselves transform the experience of suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997).

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28 In conversation with her during a meeting at the University of Manchester, December 2011.
29 In Irving 2007: 196
The following chapters of this thesis develop this argument further by showing how creative practice can become a method for researchers and participants to reflect upon how official and personal narratives come together in subjective representations of experiences such as crossing. As mentioned before, the interpretation of every experience is determined retrospectively by the experiences that follow it. Hence, it is from within the contrasting perceptions Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud had while settling in Italy that specific meanings were ascribed to their journeys.

**Life in Italy - a trap or an opportunity?**

I truly felt trapped when I arrived in Italy. When some time passed and I found myself alone. Being alone, I put myself to think. What have I become? What am I doing? And why am I doing, what I’m doing? And at the end of all this, also, what do I want to do? Now I’m in Italy. I feel I’m really in a cage and I can’t get out. Even if I do something that I like, in the end I can’t find the purpose of it. And I feel trapped until I don’t find a way to get out of Italy.

Mohamed, September 2012

Nine years had passed and Mohamed had confirmed his father’s prophecy and not found what he had been looking for. As he expressed in his own writing, he realised that he had fallen into a bigger trap, far from his familiar world with a burden of unfulfilled expectations and living once again at the margins of a world he had aspired to belong to. “Without documents in Italy you are nobody,” he often told me. Living illegally far from familiar places and meaningful others transforms one’s body into a “no-body, an illegal alien” (De Boeck 2012: 76). Thus Italy, as expressed by Mohamed’s narration, turns to entrap his living, moving body, by becoming an “unliveable zone [...] a kind of no-where, neither home nor not at home, maybe beyond home” (Jeffers 2012: 64).

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30 Text written during our theatre workshop
Mohamed had often been stopped by police and even detained a few times for long regular checks. The authorities had taken his fingerprints, recorded him as an irregular foreigner and instructed him to leave the country, notifying him with an official document stating clearly that if he did not comply, the next time he is stopped by the police he will be put into a detention centre and possibly deported. His social identification as a criminal, which he had sensed at the very moment of disembarking, had undermined his self-confidence for years, defining the way he believed he was perceived by others as completely invisible (hence feeling like a no-body) or in very specific moments as overly visible in the eyes of the authorities. Whenever we walked through the streets together, entered a bar or drove on the motorway, Mohamed would become stiff and silent if we saw a police car. Once he 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.” His bodily reactions were a specific result of how he saw himself through the eyes of the police. Not having any documents also affected his work, in which there was no stability or just treatment and payment. He spent months waiting for his employers (sometimes his own compatriots) to pay him for work he had done, and even when it was apparent he had been swindled, he could not report this to the police and there was no way for him to find legal support. Furthermore, his having no documents and not being able to send money back to his indebted family made his possible return all the more distant and difficult. In Tatoun, the comparison between those who had succeeded in Italy and those who failed in their migratory projects was fierce and merciless. Those like Mahmoud and Mohamed who had crossed the Mediterranean Sea could not return to visit the families for many years as the fear of being seen as a failure, a worry my interlocutors often mentioned, was a definitive impediment. Mahmoud identified this type of experience as one that turned a brave adventurer, “one that had taken his life in his own hands” (Lucht 2012), into a migrant. This term for him was signified by years of waiting for opportunities to become real, the impossibility of re-joining one’s family and a constant criminalisation of one’s presence.
Endless Transformation

On several occasions during the three years I have known Ali, he has come to me or other friends utterly frustrated and disillusioned about the way his life in Italy was going, stuck between possibilities that revealed themselves as inaccessible to him. But what seemed to worry him most were the changes he noticed in himself, as he had to adapt to difficult circumstances, on one hand becoming more cunning and self-interested (at work, with friends and flatmates), and on the other becoming weaker and more susceptible to temptation and wrongdoing (shortcomings during the holy month of Ramadan, relationships with women, the consumption of alcohol). I remember the dramatic expression he used to define this change in the way he perceived himself. He said: “Believe me, before I was very religious, and a good guy. I had a white heart, but now I feel it’s blackening by the day…” A white heart, *qalb abyadh*, these are words I often heard in Egypt, when people described someone with good intentions, as gentle and generous, someone who is honest and whom people could count on. Ali was worried that when he returned to his village, people would not recognise him. He said:

I’m split into two, half of me in Egypt, half of me here. Half is still what I call a good person, a right person that still respects his own religion and his customs, the other half doesn’t even think about this… these parts of me are in conflict within me. And I often wonder… is this me?31

On one hand he felt drawn by his past and the values he shared with his community of origin, and on the other he recognised how he had changed and adapted to different circumstances and relationships. This again leads to an anthropological reflection about how we’re not just different from each other as human beings, but how we can also be different within ourselves. As Ali describes, we are divided between tensions and conflicts that take place in the process of our thinking. At the same time as we may feel ashamed of certain choices we have made, or of changes that have taken place in our life, we are not in control of our thoughts and of the conflicts that take place within them. This also applies to Ali’s understanding of the changes that took place within him.

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31 During a conversation on my return from Egypt when looking at videos and photographs of Qasabi, September 2012.
After a few years of living in Italy, without documents, and without being able to send any money back to his brother and the rest of his family, Ali came across a song, which is the one he chose to bring to the theatre workshop. The image that poignantly emerged was one of a man in front of his reflection in the mirror:

What would you do if one day you fell asleep, and when you woke up the next day you would see yourself in the mirror... and cried.
A question goes in your mind; you scream... who am I? Who am I?
Am I still who I was or am I divided into two persons?
So what's next?
Hey you in the mirror tell me, explain to me what's going on...'

Echoing Ali’s angst, Bakhtin has memorably said: ‘[N]othing is more frightening than the absence of an answer’.33

A year after we began this research, an unexpected and ‘critical event’, so to speak, took place in my friends’ lives, causing a fundamental change in how they related to their life narratives. In September 2012, the Italian government decreed a new amnesty enabling Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud to legalise their papers and presence in Italy. This process took quite a long time. From the first bureaucratic step to the final attainment of the papers, people could wait between six to eight months. But nevertheless, this made an enormous difference to the ways in which they re-described their purpose of migrating to Italy. Finally, they had the opportunity to redeem themselves and their future, which was again re-inhabited by possibility. Interestingly though it was not just the future, in the sense of the forward tense, which was the focus of their conversation, but also their past, as memories re-emerged in light of changed circumstances. Just like after the moment of crossing the Mediterranean, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud felt all their sacrifices had finally regained a purpose. In the logic of sacrifice, these men were again setting their sights on what was perceived as a more certain future. A kind of rebirth was taking place. When Ali came out of the central police station, holding his permit, and kissing it many times as if to feel its ‘reality’, he cried out:

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32 Original title of the song using social network transliteration on YouTube: Hate3amal eih? (What will you do?), interpreted by the very popular Egyptian singer, Sherine. Ali chose to bring this song to the theatre workshops for its lyrics, as he saw it as representing what happens to him when he faces a critical moment in his life.
33 In Madison 2006: 320
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 I felt ashamed.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{34}\) In rushes of documentary, January 2013
Introduction to Part II
Research Practice in the Field

On my return from Egypt in September 2012, I invited Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud to participate in a theatre workshop I was facilitating. I wanted to explore how changes in their circumstances (thanks to advances in the legalization process) affected the way they imaginatively and narratively understood their choices and past experiences, and a future now re-inhabited by existential possibilities. I intended to use theatre practice to investigate participants’ experiences of coming to terms with a ‘limit’, what they perceived as a symbolical border of sorts, and the existential future possibilities that emerged from that moment. We explored these themes through physical and verbal improvisation, songs and creative autobiographical texts. My participants had contrasting reactions to the activities that allowed them to think deeply about their personal experiences and how they related to them in the present. In order to escape the ethically problematic ‘reality syndrome’, which restricts the imaginative and theoretical possibilities of many theatre and audio-visual projects with migrants and refugees, the subsequent storytelling process involved the telling of significant collective stories and the creative re-working of autobiographical material with participant audiences. Through using performance, fictional strategies and group work—processes familiar to art therapy—personal stories were carefully and explicitly intertwined with more collective stories. Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud reflected on the purpose of storytelling and of sharing stories more generally. Soon after the acquisition of their legal status, we decided to shoot the documentary in those places they first arrived at after crossing the Mediterranean. During filming we used walking, photography (Irving 2007) and projective improvisation (Loizos 1993; Sjöberg 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2017 and Forthcoming) as mnemonic and imaginative methods. The journey and the environment, as much as the creative methods used, provoked specific reactions and stories to emerge. The photographs captured the empty places my protagonists associated with an array of different emotions, memories and alternative existential possibilities, and these were then used as the basis of short animations. The long and detailed animation process involving Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in painting what would otherwise have stayed invisible, spurred reflections between us about how memory and imagination came into being in many different ways depending on the method being used. Thanks to its ‘penetrative’ character (Wells 1998) and by being a creatively constructed film genre, animation gave us the opportunity to include
expressive representations of the authors’ experiences in the final documentary, being very useful in evoking inner states of being.

This doctoral research has accepted the invitation by scholars such as Crapanzano (2004), Irving (2007, 2011, 2016) and Rapport and Harris (2015) for anthropology to investigate the imagination and interiority, and how this affects people’s individual experience and their understanding of the world. More recently, the imagination has also been seen as fundamental in migration research, as it (in)forms people’s narratives, experiences and actions (Jackson 2008; Pandolfio 2008; Schielke and Graw 2012; De Boeck 2012; Schielke 2015; Gaibazzi 2012; 2015). Since there is no independent access into our informants’ consciousness (Irving 2007), theatrical improvisation, collaborative storytelling practices, photography, filmmaking and animation have offered ways in which to work with memory and imagination as they emerge in the creative process. Imaginative horizons are by definition in perpetual (trans)formation, and their very nature poses a challenge to conventional anthropological methodologies, which rely heavily on observation, interviews and text and ‘are often too static to capture the unfinished, transitory, and ever-changing character of people’s interior experiences and expressions as they emerge in the present tense’ (Irving 2011: 25). In our over-theorized age, Crapanzano (2004) illustrates how our epistemic outlook has almost always been directed toward the word, events, content and substance, and as Jacques Derrida reminds us, toward presence (1967). But as discussed earlier, imagined existential possibilities impose themselves on people’s perceptions of the world and of themselves by appearing through their absence. They are dimensions of experience that lie beyond the immediate perception of objects and landscapes. So how can we, as anthropologists, investigate and represent these intangible realms of existence? How are we able to access what slips from the grid of structured language, and then resist tying it to objectified analysis, or cohesive and linear narratives?

The quest for new methodological approaches also aims to show that imaginings are not merely abstract products of consciousness but are embodied and embedded in people’s present actions. So if imaginings are present to us, what qualities does their existence have? What ontological status can be acceded to an absence, or to a remote possibility? Understanding people’s perceptions of the future and imagination is not a theoretical question but a practical and empirical one. In order to relate the future to lived experience and make its discussion relevant anthropologically, we need to find new ways of interacting with those we work with. Moreover, understanding my participants’ discordant
temporalities, experiences and stories, demands responsive practice-based methods and a different, non-linear approach to ethnographic representation.

In the last couple of decades there has been a proliferation of creative practice used as an integral part of research, and of literature reflecting on the advantages of doing so (Saxton & Miller 1998; McNiff S 1998; Reason P & Bradbury H 2004; Thompson 2003; Mienczakowski & Morgan 2006; Gallagher 2007; Barrett and Bolt 2007; Bolton 2010; Smith & Dean 2009; Sjöberg 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2017 and Forthcoming). Although this is particularly true for arts and cultural studies, creative practice has not yet acquired a balanced relationship to theory within the social sciences. Even within visual anthropology, my personal academic background, visual, aural and performative practice is still too often conceived as illustrating researchers’ hypotheses, and even when it is used as a research *method*, little space is given to practice in its outcomes and its presentation, where text and abstraction often take over the scene. Thus, art practice should not be limited either to the final (re)presentation of research findings, nor to research methods in the field.

James Clifford (1986) has advocated for anthropological theory and methods to address the growing complexity surrounding contemporary conditions of diversity, and in particular more interdisciplinary engagement across the humanities needs to be undertaken in researching the topic of migration. Anthropologists have much to contribute, particularly through their close ethnographic accounts of the meanings, values, social relations and experiences of migrants. Sullivan (2009)\(^{35}\) notes that practitioners and scholars in the arts also offer invaluable insight through creative work, which puts the research in a more interesting position in relation to established practical and theoretical frameworks. Research conducted through practice is a process of data ‘creation’ rather than ‘collection’, and it may have outputs that are still evolving, including some that are non-verbal. Particularly when working with people who are foreign to the main language spoken, non-verbal expression enabled by image theatre, physical improvisation, art production and animation are very useful in making certain implicit information explicit, and in facilitating the communication of certain thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be very limited in verbal exchange alone (Sjöberg 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2017 and Forthcoming).

The practice for this research developed from previous experience as a community theatre facilitator with Fandema and as an educator for the Italian language school, Asnada.

\(^{35}\) In Smith and Dean 2009: 28.
From 2006, after I returned from training in Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil, I founded and developed these creative and pedagogical organisations in Milan. Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud attended either or both Fandema and Asnada, and were familiar with the theatre and storytelling practices developed by both groups.

Fandema is a multicultural theatre composed of people who wished to work creatively and politically on issues of injustice, particularly with regard to the experience of seeking asylum in and migration to Italy. Because its members did not always speak the same language, image theatre and physical improvisation were crucial to the expressive and communicative ways of elaborating stories, desires and struggles. In particular, Boal’s theatre techniques (1995; 2002) were helpful as participants were able to reflect on their lives and on their representations through the reflexive practices this type of aesthetic theatre space produces. They are able to perceive themselves ‘dichotomously’; that is simultaneously as the actors acting and as the characters representing. Other qualities Boal identifies with his theatre have also been fundamental in inspiring the practice of my fieldwork, and have fostered the creative interplay between memories and the imagination, for example with ‘telemicroscopy’ which allows for what is far way to come up close; for information that would normally be invisible or unconscious to become visible and conscious.

Similarly, an active approach to education informs the teaching of language in the Asnada school, whereby the stories and experiences of students are at the centre of the teaching and learning process. This practice is developed through storytelling techniques that often involve the body in theatrical games, or in the making of expressive and evocative artefacts. Lessons are often delivered in the form of workshops and may begin with mythical stories and universal themes (such as love, friendship, genesis, childhood, epic journeys etc.) to provide connections between different cultures and personal autobiographies. According to the pedagogical philosophy of Asnada, the learning of each word in the new language should be made meaningful by the desire to communicate one’s feelings, experiences and thoughts. In this way, language students discover and develop language over time, making artefacts composed of meaningful signifiers, represented through art objects and linguistic expressions that “contain” the inner worlds left unsigned in the ‘adopted’ language and in the new country.

In this research project, my participants and I experiment with imagination and memory through the use of specific art forms and following a distinct temporal succession. Practice
was not decided *a priori* but by one experiment leading to another. After trying something out, we looked at its limitations and opportunities as a way of projecting our work forward, engaging in a cycle of action-reflection, one of the three frames for self-inquiry set out by Judi Marshall in her contribution (2001) to the *Handbook of Action Research* (2004). This cycle moved us from one practice to the next, but also informed what intersubjectively emerged during our collaborative exchange. For example, the reflexive nature of theatre enabled us to consider how physical improvisation may act upon individual and group imagination, and how finding the right balance between personal and collective stories may lead to more profound revelations than when working strictly with testimony.

Over the past two decades there has been a growing interest in exploring people’s interior and imaginative lifeworlds, creating a trend in social science and humanities research which focuses on experience and the senses, on ways of knowing, being, remembering and imagining that may find expression in forms other than words (Pink and Hogan 2010; Cox, Irving and Wright 2016). The connections between contemporary arts practice and anthropology have been fruitful in pushing social research in new epistemological directions (Pink, Kurt and Afonso 2004; Schneider and Wright 2005, 2010, 2013; Ingold 2011; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Sansi 2015). In this respect, collaborations between ethnographers and artists (see Heister, Schielke and Swarowsky 2014) have led to the flourishing of participatory research methods by engaging field participants in the creative processes of knowledge making. Particularly in qualitative social research that seeks to enquire into experiences of health, movement and social exclusion, more traditional research methods (interviews, participant observation, focus groups) have expanded to include participatory media (Radley and Taylor 2003; Irving 2007; Reiners, Reckinger G. And Reckinger C. 2016; Delouis 2016; Roque De Pinho 2016), drawing and other art practices (O’Neill 2008; Azevedo and Ramos 2016), and theatre and performance practices (Dennis 2009; Kazubowski-Houston 2010; Lundie and Conroy 2012; Wessels 2014; Gatt 2015; Enria 2016; Sjöberg 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2017 and Forthcoming). In these ethnographic contexts framed through creative practice, the above authors have variously reflected upon the changing nature of field relationships where collaboration, co-creation, participation have come to substitute more traditional, perhaps more disengaged or objectifying, types of exchange.

It is through our close relationships that my field participants and I have often discovered, challenged and understood our actions, choices and intentions. We have worked closely
together, creatively, narratively and imaginatively. Our friendship and its underlying trust have often motivated and provided a common ground for our more intimate conversations and creative experiments. Before becoming my informants, co-researchers or participants (all words used throughout this thesis, following the mutable nature of our relationships in the field), I think it is more honest to recognise them for what they have always been to me: friends. Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud often made it clear that if it was not for our friendship and mutual trust, they would not have engaged in the research. Our collaboration recalls the long-lasting mutual friendships of Jean Rouch with his informants. His subjects used their own ideas to inform the films and ethnographic research, and thanks to their friendship, were invited by Rouch to conduct ‘reverse anthropology’ with him in France. Through devices such as ‘screen back’ and ‘informed feedback’, which were completely new to the practice of anthropology, Rouch developed a process which he termed ‘shared anthropology’ (Rouch 2003), many years before other social anthropologists would agree that fieldwork relationships are based on mutual trust, intersubjectivity and dialogue. However, as with all relationships, even the romantic glow surrounding Rouch’s ‘shared anthropology’ disguised tensions and frictions (Henley 2009).

Therefore, it is necessary for me to demystify our working relationship here too. Friendship might have been a necessary prerequisite for such an intimate exploration, but it did not always facilitate the progress of the fieldwork. I often felt very responsible for our relationship and felt troubled about keeping them engaged in a project that was not necessarily part of their priorities in the present. Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud have a very intense working life, often engaged in more than one job at the same time to pay for their living expenses and commitments to their families in Egypt. They would often be concerned with personal issues and sometimes our creative processes created an awareness of situations that agitated them. On those occasions we would spend a lot of time talking and I attempted to comfort them as a friend. At times our research would slip into the disclosure of confidential information and they would ask me whether “I was still working, or whether they could just speak to their friend.” This was not always an easy line for me to draw, as anthropological fieldwork is somehow pervasive. Anthropologists carry out fieldwork by living closely with their informants to gain their trust, and to share and observe their lives as much as possible. Screening back parts of the film to my participants, following the Rouchian tradition, and reflecting throughout and after every process was a way for us to talk things through, to make requests and re-direct our work together. We collaborated through constant negotiations. Both Kazubowski-Houston (2010) and Sjöberg (2009a and
Forthcoming) ask researchers applying collaborative approaches in their field to look more critically at relationships defined under concepts such as “collaboration” and “participation”. Kazubowski-Houston critiques the idealistic view of collaboration and urges anthropologists to reflect openly upon the consequences our presence, and absence, may have on the lives of those we work with. Sjöberg proposes the term ‘negotiation’ as better representing the fieldwork relationship. While the intersubjective approach encouraged by postmodernist anthropology referred to “collaboration, participation, co-creation, this terminology has been increasingly criticized for avoiding to make the intrinsic power relationships of the intersubjectivity transparent.” Instead the term ‘negotiation’ “recognizes the integrity of the fieldwork informants and signals the inherent conflict that arises in fieldwork situations” (Sjöberg, Forthcoming). This is especially evident when using documentary filmmaking and live performance in front of an audience, both art practices that may be partially intimidating for protagonists. Though creative practice inspired by Rouch’s approach to filmmaking served as a “provocation” (Rouch 2003) and to create the ethnographic context, I often needed to explain the purpose of a proposed activity again to make sure that Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud felt free to negotiate and be selective with material that would end up in the film and in public communications regarding our work.

Collaboration and creative practice are also central in defining an ethical framework for this research that often deals with sensitive and intimate information. For anthropological knowledge to be considered accurate and respectful of people involved, it needs to be generated in collaboration with the participants themselves. Enabling the active participation of field informants to shape the content and direction of the project also means to acknowledge their expertise and moral agency in choosing which aspect of their life they want to represent. The research’s methodological experimentation has also offered my participants more options in reflecting on their preferred ways of communicating and expressing their thoughts and feelings, by complementing, resisting and questioning what could otherwise have been directed by my own theoretical presuppositions. Animation, theatre and metaphorical stories have allowed Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud to mask, hide and transform their stories, as they wished or found interesting. Both in applied theatre, visual anthropology, observational cinema and participatory media production, practice is based on the understanding that the entire process develops following the mandate and ideas of the protagonists, who are active stakeholders in the project.

In this sense I feel compelled to add that anthropologists engaged with creative and collaborative methods should consider working with other professionals (theatre
practitioners, animators, editors or musicians, to cite examples of collaborations this project has profited from), both to add quality to aesthetic processes and products, but also to be influential in field relationships by providing other points of view and relief to a researcher-participant relationship that can often become overly charged and emotionally draining. However, collaborations with other professionals are not always easy, as there needs to be a shared understanding about how practice should motivate participants to express themselves and take the lead. Similarly in the production of the final output, colleagues need to be chosen carefully as they must be willing to negotiate their artistic authorship with those of the protagonists and the anthropologist.

Moreover, choosing to place Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s emergent voices at centre stage responds to Levinas’s (1996) sense of the ethical responsibility we have towards others. My participants’ subjective and imaginative stories relating to their experiences of migration are necessarily placed within a public debate which often reduces migrants, especially if undocumented, to numbers and bureaucratic categories. The migrant subject is topical both politically and visually, as one would notice just by following the daily news and the regular showcase of images of the outer and inner borders of Europe, of people being rescued while crossing in their hundreds on hazardous boats, or being left stranded behind barbed wire nets that deny their passage. Migrants in the mass media and political debate are generally depicted stereotypically as a mass of people, as victims and intruders. We need to recognise that [i]Images thus have become an integral part of the political regulation of migration: they help produce the categories of legality versus illegality, they foster stereotypes and mobilize political convictions (Köhn 2016: 4).

At the same time, the over-mediatised figure of the migrant has left many aspects of migration underrepresented and “under-visible” (Schielke and Graw 2012). What is systematically concealed is the individual experience of the protagonists and the complexity of their stories. By entering the minefield of distorted media discourse, audio-visual, performative or textual anthropological representations of migration have the political responsibility of bringing people’s experiences, aspirations, contradictions and voices into the public realm. In this sense, reflective practice needs to be a process supported to allow and even encourage counter-narratives, doubt and uncertainty in order for practitioners and researchers to resist the control of “political and social structures which are increasingly hemming professionals in” (Goodson 2004 in Bolton 2010: 11). I argue that any study or artwork that deals with such a politically charged and visually exploited subject cannot avoid dealing with the politics that attempt to define and constrain migrants’ existence, often by
speaking for and about migrants while denying them agency. Collaborative creative practice is a way of ensuring that research is carried out with our participants, whose voices should always question how and what is being said about them and their lives.
Chapter Three

Applied theatre and storytelling practice

*They certainly came to the Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast in search of money, but they also came in search of adventure... These young people are the heroes of the modern world. They do not bring back captives as their ancestors did in the last century. Instead they bring back goods, marvelous stories and tall tales.*

Jean Rouch, *Jaguar* 1967

“We do not ‘store’ experience as data, like a computer: we ‘story’ it.” (Winter 1988: 235)\(^\text{36}\)

During previous research conducted in 2008, I followed a group of East African refugees in their flight from Italy to the northern shores of France, attempting to defy border controls and reach the UK. As I began recording and reflecting upon people’s narrations and metaphorical expressions in the ways they made sense of difficult life conditions, I was often confronted by the inconclusiveness of most stories, and their many interruptions and silences. In those days, their interrupted biographies were also thickened by other, fictional biographies, as asking for asylum meant individuals needed to rehearse and perform the right type of story. Most people I talked to were eager to share their stories with me and with a more general public, but they all felt the impossibility of doing so while still in the transient experience of traveling and in the face of the many uncertainties concerning their immediate future. They all postponed their storytelling to when they crossed the Channel and had resettled in a safer environment that would allow them to retie the laces of their life with a renewed meaning.

However, the experience of the border is often prolonged in time and space well beyond the actual act of crossing, as was the case with Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud. The sense of not having achieved what one desired prior to travel, exacerbated by the impossibility of legalising one’s status for many years, leaves many migrants in a protracted

\(^{36}\) In Bolton 2010: 3.
state of limbo, as if the border was inscribed and carried around on their bodies (Vacchiano 2014) and in their imaginations. For many years, Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud’s protracted illegal status had given form to specific imaginations of the existential paths available to their lives, threatening expectations of what could have happened if something went wrong at work, at home or if they were caught by the police. During the legalisation process and when they found out about the amnesty, as discussed in the previous chapter, the way they thought of themselves and their life trajectories changed quite considerably. These examples have made me reflect on the fact that there is an interesting connection between the practice of storytelling and time: as people’s imagination is influenced by conditions of the present, so is the moment of ‘telling’ conditioned by the storyteller’s imagination in that moment.

This chapter looks at how theatre and storytelling offered an opportunity for the research project to engage Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in crafting their own narratives and stimulating them to reflect on their experiences, perceptions and fantasies. I believe that through the words, dilemmas and visions which emerge from protagonists during theatre improvisation and storytelling, anthropologists have the opportunity to unpack and critically contest some overarching terms and concepts on migration common in public and political discourse that tend to objectify people’s experiences. Theatre and storytelling are helpful mediums through which to venture beyond the official narratives about migration, narratives that are often reproduced through quantitative research, oversaturated with statistics and a language more reflective of bureaucratic preoccupations. Additionally, as explored later, these practices, often involving group work and at times an audience, enabled reflections and physical and emotional reactions that might have not come about if the researcher and participant were discussing alone. At times, the group may hinder storytelling but when the context has been created to foster the sharing of stories and the articulation of feelings, one person’s disclosure may trigger that of another. In art therapy literature, the echo of common themes in creative processes using artwork is referred to as “group resonance” (Pink and Hogan 2010). I argue that something very similar can occur using theatre and storytelling where a research process may become an active tool for what Dwight Conquergood would term “genuine conversation” (1985), both between participants, and between participants and researcher, which, besides its therapeutic value, could also prove useful for community building. By moving beyond participant observation and abstract theory, the creation of performative contexts as a way of conducting research can “open the space between analysis
and action”, by shaking the foundations of dominant ways of knowing (Conquergood 2002: 145-6).

Before describing and analysing the storytelling events and the theatre workshop, it is necessary to provide a brief historical context of how theatre and performance changed from an object of study to a means of ethnographic representation, and more recently into a valuable research method for social scientists.

Theatre and Anthropology: contextual background

Anthropologists looking at theatre was initially a reactionary move away from functional perspectives which emphasised the static and homogenous character of certain cultural formations. Following the semiotic, symbolic and semantic turn in the anthropology of the 70s, scholars began to analyse rituals and traditional cultural performances to gain further understanding of subjects and institutions found in religion, politics, gender relations and ethnicity. By calling for a “shift to process” Fawzia Afzal-Khan argued for social research to understand the active role of theatre practice in colonial and post-colonial settings, both in representing and resisting imperial ideologies. By foregrounding concepts of time, change and agency, the Postcolonial Theatre Anthropology as conceived by Afzal-Khan (1997) focuses on the practice of theatre making, and by doing so, moves away from observing the “other” as static, allowing us to conceive of social meaning as constantly recreated through a dynamic and often conflicted process in ritual performance. Afzal-Khan points out that the pulling together of tradition and contemporary time in the performances of masquerade companies of the Segou region in Mali, for example, recreates a mood of “subjunctive possibility” that enables performers to challenge and subvert official hierarchies of age, status and gender through parody, irony and satire.

Beyond providing new conceptions of social meaning and identity, theatre and performance offered a means through which researchers could represent their findings after returning from their field sites. Victor and Edith Turner experimented with the performance of ethnography to enliven the subject of study during their lectures and to enhance their students’ understanding of “how people in other cultures experience the richness of their social existence” (Turner and Turner 1982: 33). It was their contention that no matter how gifted researchers may be in providing explanations, the coherences of different “parts” of a
culture, their presentation and representation through text and contextual explanation will remain cognitive. By providing only cognitive connections in our (re)presentations of people’s social lives, we fail to acquire an informed impression of how they experience one another and their world. The Turners initiated the use of performance for pedagogy in the teaching of anthropology, and their experimentation spurred other social scientists and performance scholars, also critical about the primary use of text to convey an understanding of people’s experiences, to present their research findings in dramatised forms known as “ethnodramas” (Denzin 2003; Saldaña, J. 2005; Mienczakowski, J. And Morgan, S. 2006; Schneider, J. et al. 2014). This alternative output has been used in the qualitative research of various disciplines: in anthropology, sociology, education and health care, to name a few.

Performance ethnography, used as a research approach, grew out of the postmodern crisis of representation and the critique of truth claims, meta-narratives and the objectifying production of knowledge. This critique legitimised the exploration of other ways of knowing, alternative approaches to carrying out research, and new forms of representation. Researchers within this new paradigm acknowledged the deception of objectivity, the oppressive dominance of the written word, and the colonising effect this had for those turned into objects of investigation. Conquergood (1985) saw the role of performance in research as an ethical act because it addressed the crisis of representation by providing a way of knowing that emerged through embodiment, empathy and by “deeply sensing the other”. Performance ethnography also involves participants in the process of knowledge generation during fieldwork. The process of theatre creation offers a unique and compelling way of accessing people’s marginalised subjectivities and produces knowledge by incorporating those aspects of social life that can otherwise elude documentation in textual transcription and speech. It enables researchers to draw out responses that would perhaps have remained tacit. Instead of merely considering the cognitive social processes, theatre practice as a research method accords importance to spontaneity, intuition, experience, embodiment and affect.

Theatre’s capacity to go into a more detailed account of events, people’s experiences and reflections connects to Augusto Boal’s postulation of theatre as “telescopic” (1995), by which he means it brings us closer to details that may seem obscure or hidden away and helps us make sense of the parts in relation to the whole. This characteristic of theatre practice, revealed by Applied Theatre of which Boal is one of the founders, has turned
performance into an extraordinarily useful tool for social scientists to explore and represent people’s own experiences, reflections, interpretations, narratives and counter-narratives.

This paradigm shift took place in parallel to practitioners’ development of dramatic activities outside of conventional mainstream theatre institutions, often engaging with socially marginalised groups of people. This was done with the intention of bringing unheard voices into the public realm in order to instigate debate, challenge prejudice and stereotypes and improve people’s lives. Community theatre, which is a form of applied theatre, has become popular amongst researchers in search of alternative ethnographic methods. Forum theatre (a technique of the Theatre of the Oppressed, as theorised by Boal) and participatory theatre projects have been used to create more inclusive and reflexive research spaces, where knowledge emerges through co-production and in constant negotiation between the interests and needs of both researcher and field participants. As Luisa Enria points out in Co-producing knowledge through participatory theatre (2016), participatory and creative research methods such as those offered by theatre practice do not efface power imbalances in the researcher-informant relationship. She argues that by giving importance to individual experience and narratives, they are one way of countering and reflecting upon unequal power relations in the field.

By using participatory theatre (in particular the Theatre of the Oppressed) for a more critical ethnography, in schools for example, Dennis (2009) notices how research broadens its goals by including consciousness raising, critical reflection and the exploration of possibilities into how things could be, not only for the individual and group involved (Korth 2002) but also for the research itself (Fine 2006). In describing the potential in carrying out a critical ethnography, Dolan (2005) claims that “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (ibid: 1). This “place”, Dennis argues, has proved to be fertile for carrying out research.

I argue that the processes of theatre and storytelling performances, which offer an opening for actors and audiences to aesthetically (imaginatively, through the senses and created or improvised speech) experience possible alternatives to a status quo, “as if” they were true, is what makes theatre and storytelling such compelling tools both for social researchers and field participants to explore and together reflect on personal and collective aspirations, preoccupations and contesting narratives.
Using a phrase developed by Lather (1991), research projects whose validity rests, even partially, on effects they inspire for those involved in the study can be said to have catalytic validity. By carrying out research within processes of making, exploring and transforming, social science inspired by performance and a more affective approach to people’s lifeworlds should also provide opportunities for experience rather than explanations of experience.

In particular, by working with groups of socially marginalised people, applied theatre aims to bring unheard voices and stories into the public realm with the intention of using drama “to improve the lives of individuals and create better societies” (Ackroyd 2000). Although the aspiration to trigger social and personal change is a feature common to all facets of applied theatre, Helen Nicholson has advised against emphasising the utilitarianism of applied drama at the expense of its artistic and aesthetics qualities. This is a renowned and highly discussed conflict in performance studies, identified as contrasting ‘effect’ to ‘affect’ in applied theatre projects and performances. This issue has been discussed in great detail in James Thompson’s latest publication (2009), where he advocates a return to affect in applied theatre in order to recover people’s imaginative and emotional engagement with the world. Both Thompson and Gallagher caution performance-based researchers against the tendency of following the imperative of narrative and testimony (2009; 2007), an aspect of many applied drama projects involving refugee and migrant participants. Imaginative and theoretical capacities are often constrained and limited by the ‘reality syndrome’, and unfortunately a lot of applied theatre and documentaries dealing with issues of migration don’t achieve much more than highlighting those ideas or ‘discoveries’ we may already hold true. Alison Jeffers (2012), who analyses performances made about refugee stories or with refugee actors in the UK, Europe, Australia and the US, reveals how the performativity of the bureaucratic refugee story is transferred into theatre performances where the refugee is often depicted in the role of victim or the survivor of dramatic events. For asylum seekers to be granted asylum, their story of trauma needs to be judged as authentic and truly tragic. The demand for “genuine” refugee stories and performances often relies on providing testimonies of crude realism, where agency is downplayed and instead a sense of tragedy pervades. In addition, performances that do not use refugee actors generally aim to recreate scenes and experiences through which the audience may come closer to the refugee experience of

37 In Dennis 2009: 69.
38 In Nicholson 2005:3.
subjugation in order to empathetically identify with the refugee subject. In fact, this experience provided by certain performances can be so overwhelming in the amount of information to take in, and so emotionally demanding to simply shock or paralyse their audiences. Jeffers notes that these performances may in fact be responding to an audience whose imaginary on asylum seekers, refugees and migrants has already been formed by sympathetic public and political discourse:

It may be tempting to dwell on representations of trauma in some refugee performance because the alternative is to portray refugees as “mad” in the sense of angry, as active agents of change, to an audience who are better prepared to accept an image of depressed passivity. (Ibid: 139)

The interesting revelation of these types of performances, which attempt to put audience members in the shoes of the refugee, is the way that empathy works in transforming anger into pity and sympathy, which do not translate into the urge of taking political or transformative action. “The potential to generate anger on behalf of asylum seekers often seems to be diminished by the need for representations of anguish, trauma and, particularly, abjection” (ibid: 63). In the imperative of telling a refugee or migrant story, making individual tragedy a matter of social and political concern, Thompson (2009) critically asks: who is telling and who is listening? Who asks for stories? Who owns them? Who speaks? Who tells the truth? Who is implicated in the telling?

Originating within a Western concept of psychosocial healing, the imperative to tell and the condemnation of silence rests on the assumption that “telling one’s story [is the preferred method and necessary precondition for relief, healing and liberation” (Thompson 2009: 45). This results in a view of the binary opposite of ‘telling’, that is ‘silence’, ‘not telling’ or ‘telling a lie’ as damaging. It is “denigrated as a dangerous retreat, a failure or the site of continued harm”(ibid). But people around the world respond differently to violence and traumatic events. ‘Silence’ or ‘not telling’ are socially constituted practices and they can be seen as ways of rendering life more bearable. Thompson poignantly asks if at times, doesn’t one have to “bury one’s truth in order to live as well?” (ibid: 59). Similarly,
we could say that dwelling in one’s own traumatic stories may be re-inflicting damage upon the person.

Some authors who have critically written about the art of storytelling have assumed that the process of “storying” experience can only happen once the experience is over (Arendt 1973; Jackson 2002; Cavarero 2001), when the traveller can take the necessary distance from the journey to be able to narrate it. Although that may be applicable for the actual act of narrating one’s story, as stated before, experience and imagination itself are also affected by existing expressions, metaphors and histories. Anthropologists such as Pandolfo (2007) and Vacchiano (2007), both carrying out research in Morocco with young *harragas*\(^{39}\), have noticed that what enables a story to be told are those discourses and words already available for expression.

That is why it is important to evaluate the dialogical connection between histories (of a region, a context, a thematic area) and stories (mythical, religious, folk etc.) with parts created by and reiterated within subjective experience (Vacchiano 2007). Experience and the body can somehow be seen as vehicles through which existing stories are filtered, revisited, re-signified and through which new ones are recreated. There is a need to go beyond understanding people that have migrated as solely identifying with their present conditions and past history (reinforced for example by the *trauma diagnosis* and by the representation of migrants as victims, and emphasised by stories of loss, sacrifice, suffering, displacement and abjection). In order to come closer to the things that constitute the subjective experience of migrants, there are ways in which theatre exercises can allow the more imaginative realms to emerge, as the sense of one’s presence is mediated through existent popular, mythical or religious stories and the absence of other existential possibilities.

As discussed in previous chapters, the people who collaborated with me on this research project did not place themselves merely in their past or present routine struggles, but their subjective experience of the world was inhabited by imaginings that combined temporalities in very particular ways. Creative practice allows us to acknowledge the imaginative potential of our existence and that “[h]uman beings dream themselves a world” (Dracklé 2004)\(^{40}\). In order to understand the world of others we need to venture into this

\(^{39}\) The word for “migrants” in the Moroccan dialect.

realm as well. Some of Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s imagined existential possibilities concern the lives they could be living if somehow things had gone differently (if they had stayed in Egypt with their families; if they had gained legal status earlier; if they had died while crossing the sea, etc.), others are still projected as possibilities in the future, lives to hope for (a successful return to their country; building a family in Milan; becoming an actor, etc.) or to dread (not being able to see a parent before s/he dies; becoming mad; suffering detention or deportation; being seen as a failure back home, etc.).

By engaging with theatrical re-enactments, games and exercises, Gallagher notices it is possible to uncouple the notions of analytical distance and truth in order to really engage with participants, to perform with them and follow the different routes they might take to their truth claims (2007). Therefore, more than the debate of what is true or not, I was interested in how applied creative practice could give me an insight into how people construct their perceptions of reality, and what stories come out of such a process. In making and telling stories, John Berger argues we rework reality in order to make it more bearable. Because, as T.S. Eliot’s puts it in one of his most memorable poetic lines: “human kind cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot 1968).

If telling stories is an existential need, as Jackson wants to prove, it is because our evolutionary passage to humanity has depended upon a natural ability to lie – to use language not only to represent what is the case but to act and speak otherwise, in terms of what is in one’s interest and to one’s advantage to say and do. To be able to misinform, mask, or misdirect gave our ancestors a vital edge in space and subsistence. Ontologically, this ability to contradict or deny reality is imperative for existential survival where the need to create ‘necessary illusions’ helps us cope with otherwise unsupportable situations. Camus reminds us that if stories are lies, it is not because to lie is to say what isn’t true; “it is also and above all, to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels” (1970:336). Rather than making a distinction between ‘authentic truth’ and ‘performed fiction’, the two are to be understood as intertwined, or even indistinguishable (Schechner 1985; Turner, Bruner et al. 1986). By playing theatrical games and exercises, drama elicits understandings and utterances that would otherwise be inaccessible, and creates an aesthetic dimension within research to ensure the investigation takes into account

41 In Jackson 2006: 16.
the non-linear, unpredictable, unsayable and visual as vital parts of the construction of the group’s knowledge of the issue.

In the following section of this chapter, I will discuss the experience of experimenting with image theatre, narrative, imaginative improvisation and group work, in order to provide a closer look at how the issues presented in the first section of the chapter have also emerged from practice and possess the specificities of each personal aspiration and dilemma, story, context and timeframe.

The theatre workshop was our first creative experimentation and took place at the very beginning of fieldwork in Milan in September 2012. The storytelling events were conceived of as ways to explore questions arising from the theatre workshop, following an action-reflection cycle, and were devised in collaboration with Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud during the months until December.

**Theatre Workshop: the limit, the trap and the future**

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?
How long will he be absent
Tell me how long
When he gets up in the morning,
Who will give him his clothes?
Who will console him when he is sad,
Who, tell me, who?

*Ah Ya Lalaly, Wust El Balad*

I co-facilitated the theatre workshop with Anna Serlenga, a theatre director also carrying out her PhD research in theatre studies and who had previously been my professional partner in a forum theatre project. Both of us, following our separate research questions, were interested in exploring theatre techniques and exercises that would help investigate two main thematic areas. Firstly, we were interested in personal experiences of

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42 Song suggested by Egyptian members of the Fandema group for one of our Forum Theatre plays.
facing what one considers an important limit, conceived as something that had “entrapped” one by limiting one’s sense of movement, existentially, socially or geographically. Secondly, we were interested in exploring the envisioned imaginary future lives propelled by this limit. We saw the workshop as a collaborative and creative research opportunity and presented it as such to the participants, who were asked to bring material (a song reflecting their experience of being trapped and an image that represented the limit for them) and stories of their own, but also to participate actively in the reflection of the process, in relation to the topics, exercises and structure of the workshop. On more general terms Anna and I were aware our professional priorities differed because, as a director, Anna was aiming at a theatrical production and was less interested in applied theatre workshops as a means of collaborative social research. The people both of us invited to the workshop corresponded with our different experiences of working with theatre: 30% of the group was made of trained actors, while the rest were members of the Fandema group, and were more familiar with the use of theatre as a means of self-expression, of using theatre’s “plasticity” and “telescopic” nature (Boal 1992; 1995) to unearth and creatively explore social issues, and of forging a sense of community. This time I communicated that the purpose of the workshop was to explore the specifically selected themes for research purposes only. Anna and I decided to collaborate on this experiment as we believed our different backgrounds could enrich each other’s process of enquiry, bringing together technique, aesthetic research, people’s experiences and life stories.

Bringing together speech and the body, we wanted to ‘critically examine’ (Thompson 2003) actions, dilemmas and hopes of the past, present and future. In recreating a privileged “place for viewing” (from the Greek etymology of the term theatron) we believed that theatre practice would foster self-observation and self-analysis among our participants, as the reflexive quality of theatre would help them perceive themselves “dichotomously” (Boal 1995), simultaneously as actors and as representations. But we also used other creative forms, such as writing, video and drawing, as I was interested in exploring how these different practices interacted with each other. In particular, the aesthetics of theatrical improvisation and of drawing created a context where verbal communication could be complemented by physical and figurative expression.

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43 The “importance” every one gave to the limit was highly subjective, but our initial indication as facilitators was for participants to identify a limit which, when overcome, would create a significant change within one’s life as lived until that moment.
We used a physical improvisation exercise called ‘the square’, which Anna borrowed from Argentinian theatre director Cesar Brie, that has the aim of structuring theatrical improvisation in order to enhance the group’s self-awareness in the creation of the aesthetic scene. After tracing its perimeter and the diagonals on the floor, the actors were asked to enter the aesthetic scene (the square) and improvise individually and collectively by creating images that resonate through a playful experimentation with space, balance, rhythm, resonance and dissonance. The idea consisted in actors taking from and feeding into each other’s imaginations by responding intuitively and physically to images and actions created and which took the shape of a choral “body” moving together, achieved through a collective “flow”. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has described flow as an:

action that follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between himself and the environment.

In order to achieve this flow, Mohamed noticed how difficult it was for him as an untrained actor to play without feeling the anxiety of following what the group was already doing in the square, or attempting to achieve his own idea. In over-thinking his actions and reflecting on this he explained it as a lack of contact with the group, and his unwillingness to:

ruin the beautiful thing the others were doing, because by looking at them I said to myself I couldn’t do it. So I stay out, I don’t interrupt this thing [the flow] because when I enter, the game changes…

Mohamed’s difficulty was also echoed by Ali and Atef (another Egyptian member of the Fandema group), who all expressed they probably needed some more time to “understand” or to warm up with other physical games that could help them exercise their imagination, help them feel as though they belonged to the group and feel connected to others, in order to reflect that into more spontaneous bodily movements. Imagination is here understood as

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44 Cesar Brie is a fairly popular theatre director in Italy, who produced a lot of his work as an exile in Europe during the dictatorship in Argentina. His work is known for being poetical, imaginative and metaphorical.
relational and physical. As the actor and director Simon McBurney explained in an interview on BBC Radio 3, imagination is a “muscle” that can be exercised in physical theatre practice and that becomes as important as all the other muscles in our body. By attributing a physicality to imagination, McBurney’s expression states two qualities concerning imagination that have been relevant to my participants’ experiences: firstly, as mentioned before, imagination is not just an abstract faculty within the brain, but is located in the muscles of the body, and can therefore be felt and experienced; secondly that our imaginative capacity is somehow connected to movement, and it can thus be exercised, strengthened or paralysed.

Therefore, those actors trained in exercising “the muscle of imagination” could more easily enter and leave the aesthetic space, where one’s imagination fed into the group’s, and which played out at the level of the body. Due to lack of time and underestimating their importance, we omitted most group integration exercises that Fandema members needed in order to make the required imaginative leap. This observation may be useful to keep in mind, as the imaginative possibilities facilitators and researchers wish to explore through physical improvisations may not be so easily accessible, and may require longer time to “warm up”.

The activity of the square was seen as an imaginative introduction to ‘narrative images’ on the topic of “limit”, which then followed. Without the use of verbal exchanges, actors improvised by using each other’s bodies to create physical moving scenes, collectively incorporating the sense of rhythm and balance acquired in the previous exercise. This was an exercise that reminded Mohamed and Ali of the “complete the image” and “sculpt the statue” theatre exercises, which we had used in previous workshops, and in which without using words, actors improvised using their own and other participants’ bodies, in a continuous flow of single scenes. Many scenes were improvised in succession as if the group was progressively exercising and exploring its imaginative potential by using individual participant’s experiential material and constantly reworking it, aesthetically, imaginatively and performatively. All actors became engaged in a sort of feedback loop typical of what Schechner had identified as ‘restored behaviour’, which he explained as “living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film” (1985: 35). So like strips of film, these strips

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46 From an interview with John Tusa on BBC Radio 3, 5 October 2003: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ncbfz](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ncbfz), accessed February 2013.

47 A term coined by Cesar Brie, meaning images created through improvisation that are representative of a story.

48 Both exercises belong to theatre games of the Theatre of the Oppressed (2002).
of behaviour are available for reconstruction and rearrangement by the performers. Stripped away from the causal systems that brought them into being, they have a life of their own, as the “source” or “truth” that originated them may be lost, contradicted, or ignored. Becoming separate from strictly personal experience, restored behaviour can thus be changed and worked on, acquiring a more symbolic and reflexive quality.

In fact, the ‘narrative image’ exercise was experienced as highly liberating, even by the members of the group that had very limited training in acting. During the reflective feedback session, various participants including Ali, Atef and Mohamed described it as “playful” and at the same time “intense” and “revealing”. After a succession of scenes where actors had moved from struggling to pass through a wall of bodies, to becoming physically torn by others who pulled their limbs in opposite directions, Ali came up with the last scene. He used Mohamed as himself, and placed him standing in front of someone sitting confidently in a stiff position, holding up her hand to suggest a request. Then he used an actor to pull Mohamed’s hand from one side, and another actress to hold authoritatively onto his other arm. The remaining group of actors physically came together, like a chorus, in a corner behind Mohamed, and began to sing an Egyptian song that had been part of a forum theatre performance the Fandema group had performed some years before. 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...

Figure 3.1 The narrative image
Instead of remaining still, the two actors holding Mohamed started moving his arms over his head, to the side, and in repetitive movements while simultaneously measuring lengths with their hands, as if checking everything was in place. Nobody needed to explain what was happening, we all understood the scene Ali had initiated and the group had progressively readjusted.

By using each other’s bodies to express a feeling related to an experience (in this case “of being at the limit”), the group entered that magical space between truth and fiction; the aesthetic space where physical improvisation allowed the creative reworking of what might have been sparked off by a subjective experience. The scene was an example of Schechner’s restored behaviour, which included a vast range of possible actions between a “not me… not me” (1985: 110) meaning where the actors are not themselves or their characters, but are impersonating. This is another concept used by Schechner to explain the field in which performance acts, combining negativity (a double negativity) and subjunctivity. In short, the performance act allows for a distance from the particular and at the same time an approximation through a mood of “subjunctive possibility” (Afzal-Kahn 1997).

The precious balance achieved in the previous scene is quite rare thing to achieve in a workshop setting, and difficult to maintain throughout the entire process. Our work oscillated between experimenting with projective improvisation and exploring the more personal stories. The autobiographical work that followed the creation of this scene appeared to be influenced by its imaginative intensity. Though having experienced the same scene, when we asked participants to produce an autobiographic text under the subject “I felt entrapped when…”, Mohamed and Ali produced two different stories. Ali wrote about two separate instances that came to his mind: the first was connected to his frustrating experience at his university in Egypt, when he could not enrol into the faculty of his choosing; the second was related to the dilemma of the stairs before embarking on the ship that brought him to Italy, where he felt split between a life he was about to leave and a life he was about to start alone. Mohamed instead identified his trap as the act of arriving in Italy. His text might have been inspired by his role as one closer to his experience in the “narrative image”, where upon arrival he was checked and rechecked, measured and identified as if he was a

49 See Chapter 1.
50 See Chapter 2 and the previous “narrative image”.
criminal\textsuperscript{51}, while at the same time realising he might have lost proximity to his place of origin and significant others. After years of living life “as a criminal”, Mohamed realised that what had previously represented his imaginative horizon actually turned out to be his trap:

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.

The feelings and the story Mohamed disclosed in his text represent a counter narrative to two common assumptions that are normally re-iterated both in Egypt and in Europe when talking about migration in the media and in public-political discourses. First of all, that Europe is the Eldorado, a place of democracy and freedom, while in reality migrants’ experiences demonstrate how the possible benefits of European democracy and of (political, social, economic) freedom are reserved to a certain class of citizen. Secondly, Mohamed’s words also question the common definition of migrants as always mobile and on the move. As explained in the previous chapter, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s own definition of migration is through immobility.\textsuperscript{52} The process of remaking and rewriting past experiences might have not been revealed to me in such a way if we hadn’t explored it through the process of making and knowing that characterises theatre practice. For their potential in bringing together experience and imagination, the personal and the general, the body and the metaphor, I decided to include some of the “narrative images” into the documentary at specific moments in order to break the narrative of the edit, to open up the nonverbal, imaginative space that the physical drama improvisations had managed to achieve. This is the reason I then decided to transform them in rotoscope\textsuperscript{53} animations, in order to enhance the bodily and metaphorical qualities of each scene.

\textsuperscript{51} See Chapter 2 where he speaks about the sudden understanding of himself as a criminal after seeing the cameras and police attention directed towards them.
\textsuperscript{52} We become migrants because we can’t go back.
\textsuperscript{53} 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.
At a later stage, we asked participants to take inspiration from the songs they had brought to the workshop, and from the “narrative images” to produce a semi-autobiographical portrait using text, physical improvisation and video. We were hoping this could help the actors create an almost fictional character that would allow them to keep some distance from the particularities of their personal experience. The script would have been reworked through other improvisation exercises before flowing into the final activity where we would ask them to improvise on the script and send a video message to someone of their choice, as if it were a live-portrait of “a man/woman at the limit”. We encouraged them to intertwine their own stories with the words of the song they had chosen on a given template as much as possible. The template was proposed by Anna, and was structured with the following dramaturgical inputs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It has been a very long time that…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But never and I say never…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe me!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Anna, the objective of this dramatic structure was twofold:

It is not only helpful in facilitating participants to write a text that they would not normally know how to handle, but also to highlight how the same “matrix” can be used to produce an infinite variety of dramatic combinations. Such is the great potential of imagination!  

Although we thought the physical improvisation, the lyrics of the song, and the structure of the template would allow participants to distance themselves from sticking uncomfortably to their own story, the fact that there was an “I am…” at the beginning of the text created difficulties for many, especially those who were less trained to take a

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54 From a documentation recording of our reflexive feedback sessions, September 2012.
performative distance in order to act out someone so close to themselves. During the feedback session at the end of the first day, all participants noticed that the question “Who am I…?” is far too complex to allow a distancing in any immediate way, so most people ended up using the video as a way of confessing something very personal. A couple of the participants I had invited to the workshop felt very uncomfortable doing this. Mohamed refused to do it. The portrait he had created was far too close to an aspect of himself he still had trouble with. He reflected on the fact that it was not possible to transcend his limit and that he felt frustrated because he could not change this. At the same time, he felt he had different potentials within him, but it was impossible for him to prove it or act upon it. He was paralysed by these 10 years of being trapped within impossible dreams and the guilt of not having done anything for his family back in Egypt. There was nothing creative that could come out of this moment. Prendergast and Saxton (2015) argue that stories too close to reality “diminish the possibilities of envisioning other options.”

Furthermore, defining one’s character in a letter and later in a video message is close to what John L. Austin (1962) has termed a ‘speech act’, indicating speech that has locutionary force. This was apparent in the destination and objective Ali ascribed to the video message:

I am the person, a person who had many dreams to realise […] I never thought that I would get to the point of not being able to decide my own life. […] But then I met some people that gave me some hope in realising my dreams. So I realised that I am still alive, I am not dead. But this is a message for the people who are also thinking of doing the same things that I did. Think, before taking such an important step in your lives, because you may have an image in your head and then come and find something completely different. But never lose hope. Because you’ll find your chance anywhere, maybe even in the place where you’re living now. A bit of patience and sacrifice.55

Ali’s narrative does not only have meaning but also intends to have an effect. It is as if his speech was bestowed with the power to act, to act as advice to others who may want to take a similar path to his. Mohamed’s refusal to produce the video-message is a further

55 Ali’s video message, rushes from the theatre workshop.
confirmation of how his narrative of a man unable to generate any significant change in his life paralysed his performative action in front of the camera. Having asked to exaggerate through theatrical improvisation certain traits of this character at the limit, as they described it in their autobiographical text, Mohamed plunged even deeper into his own experience of feeling trapped as opposed to distancing himself through fiction. He said:

To speak in front of the camera, this is where I show that I truly haven’t managed to come out of character. In front of the camera it will be apparent that I haven’t made it.

The camera and the performance of the speech would have combined to fix a state and character of himself he intimately wished to escape from and transform. Narratives, Michel de Certeau claimed, should be seen as “producing effects not objects” (1982: 235). On this occasion I also understood how Mohamed perceived the video camera, set on a tripod, as an intimidating and objectifying medium.

In terms of creative practice, Mohamed’s difficulty posed both ethical and methodological questions. How can we, as practitioners-researchers, give input that is broad enough so participants can freely choose to what extent express their own feelings and insecurities? A question that was also posed by the group during the final feedback session was: when is it helpful, both in terms of creativity and of the reflective and emotional process, for participants themselves to be working on their own stories? How does the process change when participants work on each other’s stories instead?

Although torn in two, and with conflict and tensions within him, Ali felt much more confident performing his video-message in front of the camera, and turned his speech into a story with a moral finale addressed to other young people like him in Egypt, who might be thinking of taking the same route by wishing to leave the country. At the time of the workshop he had a less troublesome relationship with his choices and his past, perhaps due to the fact that he was the only one to just have finalised his legalisation process.

When is it that, as human beings, we realise there is something transferable and shareable within our own stories? The fact that Ali treated his own experience as a teaching, seemed to give him the freedom to stick as much as he thought useful to his life history, while at the same time using the autobiographical “I” to insert metaphors and figurative language. It seemed as though Ali had enough detachment from his own existential conflict
and more hope for the future, in order to be able to be, using Geertz’s terminology, a more imaginative and conscious “authoring self”.

It is thanks to these reflections that Anna and I decided to change our schedule for the remaining workshop and allow for more fictional elements. As mentioned before, the action-reflection cycle generated new knowledge to transform a past action into a future action (in terms our research) but it was also teaching Ali and Mohamed about themselves and the possible effects and purposes of their narratives.

We did this by asking other actors to act possible lives back to the protagonist in a competition where s/he needed to be convinced of one and choose it, thus making the exploration of future possibilities more fun and less self-indulgent. The author would model his/her different existential options using the other actors’ bodies, freezing them into a position and expression, and successively whispering in their ears some information regarding the life they were about to improvise (for example: you are a very rich business man, you travel around the world, your kids are being taken care of by babysitters, you miss them but you feel very successful…). The improvised competition then had to take place on a set of chairs in front of the camera. Once the embodied life possibilities concluded their improvisation, each actor had to pick up a copy of the image with which the author had represented his/her limit, and paint the qualities of the life they were personifying over it.

![Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 – Mohamed’s possible lives beyond the sea (the limit)](image)

Mohamed’s image of the sea was modified by the paintings of his possible lives as serving in the army in Egypt\(^{56}\), if he had returned (Figure 3.2); as an actor/theatre facilitator, following an ideal life he had started to fantasise about after becoming part of the Fandema group (Figure 3.3); and finally as a student, fulfilling his dream of finishing his studies and getting a degree or Diploma (Figure 3.4).

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\(^{56}\) 1, 2 or 3 years of military service is obligatory in Egypt until the age of 30.
The link that we, as facilitators, had foreseen between the image of the limit and the possibilities that appeared beyond it was perhaps not as evident to everyone as we thought it would be. We left it inexplicit so that participants didn’t feel intimidated by consciously modifying an image another person had chosen to represent something very sensitive. My interest in fact, intending to work with animation at a later point of the research, was to see what imagery would come from the actors’ imaginations and if it would somehow affect or surprise the authors. Mohamed presented an interesting reflection when he looked at the three copies of his image:

It feels good that someone has drawn my possibilities on the image that represented a moment I felt stuck between the sky and the sea. Now that I look at these images though, I realise that these also could be true. It could have been like that too, why not?

Mohamed’s memory of crossing his limit, the sea, was enriched and re-created through this realisation, that came to himimaginatively after the theatrical play and by looking at the unexpected combination of imagery.

During the reflective feedback, some participants noticed that due to the fact it was set up as a competition, the more complex facets of these possible lives were most probably silenced, so the game was between the stereotyped versions of these lives. What about a possible life that could be a fear, a surreal dream, or a preoccupation? And what about the complexities of making a choice? Only Mohamed thought of military service, which is an option that puts him off returning to Egypt before he is 30. And although it started off by focusing on the body (initial statues), it went on to an almost strictly verbal performance. Perhaps if the body had been more of a protagonist within the improvisation, the interplay of imagination between the actors and the author’s perception would have been less predictable.

Also, after seeing his possible lives acted out, Mohamed noted that if he had thought seriously (as opposed to doing it for a game) of his possible lives, he would probably have thought of different ones, but immediately afterwards, he also commented on the impossibility of coming to choose the “real” ones, as he found none of them convincing. He added that he was deceived in the competition, as none of them really won his choice. I wonder if through this game, where participants saw their imaginary lives acted back at them, what was before an ungraspable vision became something somehow experienced. To
what extent can an imaginary life be experienced through a mirrored performance? What possibilities are at play in this sense if we look at social performances such as the Carnival in ex-colonial contexts, or at the community theatre technique of ‘playback theatre’ where the audience sees its stories acted back at them by trained actors? Finally, how does this mediated experience affect the way people continue to imagine? Crapanzano (2004) has poignantly admonished us of the vanishing and unfixable nature of horizons; as soon as we reach out for them or try to grasp them through words and representations, they immediately transform into something different.

**Storytelling Nights: courage, doubt, patience and adventure**

![Figure 3.5 Stories entangled](image)

“There are stories which we like to hear over and over again. 
There is always something new that you can get from them each time.”

Ali, December 2012

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57 After listening to the prophet Ibrahim’s story, told by Mohamed.
(M) “I like telling my story because it’s like when you go to the doctor’s, you know? When you have a problem inside, something you want to take out, so that you can feel better. And I’m happy that people are interested to listen to me.”

[…]

(A) “Do you prefer real-life stories?”

(M) “Yes, the ones that talk about life. Because they teach us many things. I also like what we do after we tell the story... for me this is like asking: what have you learned today? This is the sense that I get from it.”

Mahmoud, November 2012

Nowadays it is possible to admit that migrant stories have opened up new strands in literature, in the arts, in theatre (applied or not), as much as in social research. The Italian poet and novelist Erri De Luca wrote: “our lives will be your adventure tales.” In popular culture there is an undeniable demand for and fascination with stories of migration and exile. Often these stories are told and circulated by political and social activists, sympathising newspapers and media channels, public figures, artists and writers in order to inform, raise awareness and reclaim rights by prying upon a shared humanity and creating empathy towards refugees and migrants. Different scholars have identified problems with ‘empathy-driven’ narratives, especially when their intentions may be to inspire social and political change by reproducing stories of abjection and violence. They may in reality be achieving opposite results: pity and sympathy (Jeffers 2012), some sort of pleasurable consumption of the Other and, paradoxically, a diminished sense of responsibility, a reinforcement of existing categories. What happens when stories are re-worked collectively through art and theatre practice? What may the process of telling and making stories reveal about the storytellers’ and audience’s imaginary worlds? If media imagery has affected the way we look at people who have migrated, presenting them either as victims or potential

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58 From documentary rushes during the preparation of his own story.

59 See, for instance, the University of Chicago’s course in Literature of the Refugee (https://english.uchicago.edu/courses/literature-refugee), or the new strand of “Letteratura Migrante” in Italy, which has its own journal directed by Pap Khouma, a Senegalese author who writes in Italian (http://www.el-ghibli.org/)

60 in the UK, see among many: Refugee Arts (http://refugeearts.com/), the Exodus festival (http://refugeearts.com/), in Australia: http://therefugeeartproject.com/home/faqs/; also the Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei, who has been very active in producing work about the ‘plight’ of the refugees in the Mediterranean.

61 Refer to Alison Jeffers 2012, Emma Cox 2014, see Lampedusa, a recent play written by Anders Lustgarten

62 poem Emigrazioni, 2014
threats to our security (in both cases stripped of a sense of agency and of whatever makes their intersubjective world), how can migrants themselves share their experiences and imaginations with others? How can we look for stories and create a context where the imaginative and dialogic potential of storytelling is not limited by the usual ‘reality syndrome’?

Following the theatre workshop I sent a call to Fandema’s social circle for stories and storytellers. When I proposed to Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud to run a storytelling night each, I asked them to think of a story they would like to share with a group of people who didn’t necessarily have their experiential, linguistic, religious and social backgrounds. In order to facilitate their choice I asked them to think of stories that had been important in providing them with an existential and moral understanding of their world, stories that would come to their mind when coping with difficulties and help them by providing comfort, guidance, or a model. The stories could be autobiographical, belonging to an instance of their experiences, or collective, coming from family or national, religious or mythical histories. When trying to identify stories, I told Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud I was interested in seeing how they connected to them as individuals and at the same time how we could together identify questions and themes to engage a broader audience consisting of group of friends. In other words, I was inviting them to find stories that resonated with them and which were shareable. Therefore, more than the stories themselves, I wished to look at connections, at the spaces of possibility that storytelling practice could open up between the fictionalised and the real, the personal and the collective, the autobiographical and the grand narratives of mythical and religious traditions. Using a point made by narrative theorist Corman (2013), Saxton and Pendergast argue that, whether fictional or factual, “the real power of stories in applied theatre lies [...] in the connections we make between them” (2015: 283). Engaging my research participants in the process of storytelling for an audience meant that they would be the first to experience and reflect on the possible links between their subjective relationship to the story and the potential of that same story to engage the imagination of others.

The storytelling events had a precise structure: part performance and part workshop. They took place in people’s private homes as the performance involved the ‘hosts’ in

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63 We used the social circle connected to the Fandema group for this purpose.
providing the space and the preparation of specific food connected to the story told. As a facilitator of the evenings, I helped the storyteller choose and organise the narration, and following the main questions or topics of the story, I facilitated the creative session with the group. The process of preparing the nights was collaborative from its beginning, in helping my participants identify a story, prepare a script, discuss the way they wished to emphasise certain parts of the narration and finally to find the stimuli that interested them for the audience. Every performance was followed by a participatory session specific to the question or theme provided by the storyteller. After listening, members of the audience would go through an experiential activity (which could involve the whole body in a performance/ritual, or just hands for modelling, painting or crayon etching) and write down the stories, feelings and reflections that emerged through the practice. Every storytelling evening would conclude with the participant audience sharing stories that had emerged through the creative practice, and which were connected to the main story. Exploring self-crafted imagery used by participants to evoke their stories was also an opportunity for Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud to experiment with techniques they could use in the future in order to create their animated stories.

Bolt (2007) argues that there is a very specific type of knowledge that arises directly from experience, from engaging in creative process and from handling materials. She rests her observations on the Heideggerian concept that “we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling”64. This was revealed to me by a conversation I had with Mohamed after one of the storytelling nights, where participants had been asked to craft an object that represented for them a lesson of courage (which was the theme presented by the main story), by selecting and assembling different types of material provided on a table:

M: Materials help you to do, to think, because by looking or touching a handkerchief, for example, you think how you can use it. In fact I thought of the flag, by looking at the different materials, while I was thinking of a time I had felt brave, or of a person that had taught me courage...
A: So, did you think of the story first and after looked for the material?

64 In Barrett and Bolt 2007: 30.
M: Actually the two worked together. Sometimes helping, sometimes making it more complicated. Before seeing the material some moments of my present life came to mind, but then it was difficult for me to understand how the material could represent that moment. So, I had to go back with my thoughts, where did this courage come from? What had happened before? All this, while I was also considering what I had in front of me [the materials], and then immediately I thought of my father.

In his reflections, Mohamed told me there were many stories he could potentially have thought of when thinking of courage, but the main story and the material in front of him questioned his imaginative process, entering into a dialogue with his memories, his feelings, and helping him to draw certain links while discarding others:

I thought… who gave me courage? And immediately I thought of my father who helped me stand on my feet when I was little. ‘Cause this was something that made me really scared… to stand up, and fall, stand up, and fall… Then when I grew up, I started working with him, and he asked me to make a flag, in order to teach me how to sew. As I was sewing the flag I was hurting myself with the needle, and blood was coming out from my finger. But I continued to do it until I grew up and became a man. I thought of the flag because sewing was the first thing I learned to do, as a job. And the flag is an example of a person that is standing. Standing on his own two feet facing everything: the cold, the heat, the good, the bad…

The material enabled him to think of certain associations; it drew him closer to the experience (“to stand up, and fall, stand up”, “hurting myself with the needle”, “blood was coming out”) and at the same time helped him find the metaphors necessary to convey his perspective (a flag is a person standing, facing everything). The flag in his imagination stood erect, but as he tried to place it on the floor to show it to the rest of the group, the object would not stay in the position he had described through his metaphor. In a very poignant way, the “materiality” of the artwork contradicted Mohamed’s words. This led the group and Mohamed himself to burst into laughter and a few comments were made about the impossibility of someone to manage everything, alone.

When coming to select their stories, Mohamed and Ali, who had previously shared very personal stories during the theatre workshop, were happy to share something that finally
was not directly tied to their experience. Mahmoud, who hadn’t participated in the initial theatre workshop, was eager to turn his experience of traveling from Egypt to Milan into an epic story. During the process of helping my participants select stories and prepare their narration, we reflected upon other religious and moral stories that acted as their personal reference for the interpretation of their lived experiences. Ali, for instance chose to tell the story of the prophet Yusuf who had to go through a lot of hardship and sacrifice, but by being patient and resilient, Yusuf found his luck and followed his destiny. The protagonist had to pass through trial in order to become the king of Egypt and save his people. Ali did not need to make the explicit connection himself, but his friends in the audience reflected on how Yusuf seemed to have the patience that Ali was so often calling for when troubled by the integrity he felt he had lost, and a future that seemed to become all the more puzzling.

Mohamed also wanted to tell a story that had a purpose and a possible teaching. He chose to tell the first part of the story of the prophet Ibrahim, where the protagonist returns to his place of origin and looks for certainties of the existence of God by projecting his doubts onto the tangible world around him. Certain stories have “real power”, Mohamed told me “and we believe in them, we listen to them over and over again, and it’s always a great pleasure because they help you going forward”. The difference between these epic religious stories and his own life-story, according to Mohamed, was that one had “real power and meaning” while his personal ones were “purposeless and uninteresting for other people to listen to”. He was worried about not making it sound too much like a religious story because “those stories have to be told in a certain way, with the exact language”, but having a mixed audience allowed us to reflect on other aspects of the story he found interesting, and which he connected to. Though he had explicitly avoided a personal story, at the end of his storytelling night, he wrote:

One thing that I have thought for the first time tonight is that there’s just one road [the one indicated by God]…But we are humans and we’re always doubtful, because at times we use our heads, sometimes we use our hearts to think, and many times those two never agree between each other.66

This showed how Mohamed used the dilemmas of the prophet Ibrahim to reflect on his own

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65 See his autobiographical text during the photographic workshop in Chapter 4 and the conclusion to his video-message, in this chapter.
66 Mohamed, November 2012.
experiences of doubt about the choices he had made and about who he had become.

In order to create some distance to the personal story of Mahmoud, who had decided to tell the story of his journey, we constructed his narration using oral narrative artifices, such as pauses and questions to create suspense and encourage the audience to participate (So I’m asking you now... What will Omar do?), metaphors and references to fiction films (Omar threw his Libyan money into the sea, as if it was a treasure. Like Rose did in Titanic...). We used music and food during his narration to invite the audience to taste the last supper he ate with his family before leaving, and to listen to the first Italian song he learnt from caretakers at the reception centre in Sicily. Mahmoud also used a fake name for his protagonist and an account in the third person, which made it easier and more amusing when exaggerating certain descriptions: “He looked much bigger than his age, he was so strong and tall...”. His personal story turned into an adventurous epic tale, the way he wanted to tell it to his family and his children in the future.

During the storytelling events, the creative workshop asked the audience to share stories and reflections triggered by the main theme or questions of the story of the night. This was a very precious moment of co-creation and reflection, achieved through the artworks and performances the audience created after the telling of the story. It was as a group that people conducted a “meta-analysis” of the themes that had emerged, in a very similar way to group work in art therapy. It is through this dynamic that participants’ thinking processes, questions and stories were fostered and provoked. For example, in discussing the retelling of life stories to one’s children in the future, Mohamed said that in Egypt, he had very rarely heard men who had emigrated telling their real stories to the younger people. He realised that after he had migrated himself. Hence, he concluded that a father would not talk about what would be “embarrassing”, meaning crossing the sea illegally, and being without money, work or documents, hiding from the authorities. Instead, he would “tell a story, depending on which character he found brave”67. Mahmoud found his depiction of the protagonist of his story funny, courageous and adventurous. These brave characters might be influenced by the religious epic stories that Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud often made reference to, as they provided guidance, and re-established a sense of morality. The theme of courage was often brought up in the stories and in our conversation. Both Ali and Mahmoud often lamented

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67 Mohamed, during the reflective feedback session of Mahmoud’s storytelling night, December 2012.
their lack of courage in the present, compared to how they were years before, when crossing the sea, after leaving the familiar for the unknown.
Chapter Four

Audio-visual Practice

Figure 4.1 *My future return* – Mahmoud, January 2013

‘Alex: How do you think this moment will be?
Mahmoud: An emotional moment… we will feel we have missed each other too much.
Alex: When do you think this can happen?
Mahmoud: The end of next year, hopefully.’

Until very recently, the act of embracing his mother was a practical impossibility for Mahmoud. His illegal status in Italy stopped him from travelling and put him under the constant threat of sudden deportation. The only way he could turn his desired future into a possibility was through his imagination.
During the second stage of fieldwork, our methodological and existential investigation continued through the exploration of other audio-visual practices, namely documentary filmmaking, participatory photography and animation. Visual methods involving the use of cameras and video have become standard practice in anthropological research (Banks 2001: 118-128), and many scholars have explicitly argued for the use of visual material to go beyond mere research documentation and dissemination (Ruby 1991; MacDougall 1998; Bayre, Harper and Afonso 2016) in order for anthropologists and social scientists to involve their informants as moral agents in socially inclusive collaboration, where they too can become authors of the stories being told about them.

**Participatory Photography**

Initially my informants were involved in a participatory photography workshop, which I co-facilitated with the desire of exploring autobiographical storytelling through still images. In this process my colleagues were Gina Bruno, another member and facilitator of Fandema, and Marco Garofalo, a professional photographer who helped with technical input. The group was once again heterogeneous in nature; people had come to participate because they were interested in photography and its potential for self-expression, or were attracted by the participatory aspect of our work. This was a preparatory creative experience I wanted to offer my research participants in order for them to begin exploring visual representation in order to think about and tell parts of their stories. Photography was then included, quite significantly, during the shooting of the documentary and used as the basis for the animation process.

Since the workshop took place a year after Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud’s legalisation process, I was interested in exploring the theme of ‘change’ with them, as they often mentioned change when speaking about their future after the attainment of their documents. From “Everything will change, everything will be possible” (Ali, in documentary film rushes) and “Now my life can start” (Mahmoud in a message sent to me after he collected his papers), to “I’m wondering what the change will be?” (Mohamed after accompanying Ali to collect his permit, in rushes). A sense of change was confirmed, hoped for and contested within the same (critical) event. How was change experienced, and not experienced, a year after the acquisition of legal status? Working with a mixed group also allowed for ‘change’ to be signified in as many ways as possible, as it was purposefully not
restricted to migration or legalisation. As the examples will show, though Ali and Mohamed initially expressed feelings related to their acquired status, Mohamed and Mahmoud also told stories where change had occurred in less obvious moments of their life in Italy.

For one of the first activities, we asked participants to bring an object to the workshop that represented ‘change’ for them. A year had passed since legalisation and other thoughts had begun to sneak into Mohamed and Ali’s hopeful perceptions of the future:

The residency permit is actually a piece of plastic. But it costs me loads and it’s also very useful in life. It states who I am. It allows me to do many things.
To live my life normally.
To work.
To travel.
To study.
Basically all the things that I want to do, with the permit I can do them, instead without it I could do nothing.
(Mohamed, May 2014)

7 years that I live here, 6 of which I lived without an Italian identity.
In those 6 years I never thought of going away, but why?
I don’t know.
Maybe for the fear of failure, and maybe for the fear of not being able to return again!
Now I have it [the residency permit]. But with it I also got other things, other thoughts and other choices to make, and too much confusion. Now I have the possibility to choose, but the choice is very difficult. Because I don’t know what expects me there, in other places, and I don’t even know what may happen here.
Patience.  
(Ali, May 2014)

Ali’s last word recalls the story of the prophet Yusuf, which he decided to share during the storytelling nights as it serves as a moral teaching and exhortation to patience; to endure suffering for the promise of a better life to come. The patience invoked here has another kind of quality. It is less hopeful and more a way of coping with a sense of uncertainty, revealing the fact that gaining the legal papers didn’t change his understanding of his life possibilities
as split between ‘here’ and an imaginary ‘other place’, where things could be different. But the doubt that things would really be different somewhere else stops him from taking any action. The difficulty in finding a stable job, and grappling with many different ones to cover his life expenses for this reason, made it harder for him to respond to his brother Bostami’s questioning of his choices.

When we begun discussing the photographic stories of ‘change’, Ali thought of representing the three possible different lives he was often imagining in three separate photographs (in Italy - where he was, in Egypt - where he had been, and in Saudi Arabia - where he could go). Participants had a week to work on their project and capture the photos to bring to the workshop the following weekend in order to discuss with the group, edit the selection, decide on a visual structure and write the captions. Ali had been very caught up with work and his worries, which made his participation with the workshop all the more feeble and fickle. I often had to encourage him to come and engage, but his mind was absent and he felt it was a waste of time to indulge in “self-expression”.

Mohamed on the other hand, was very engaged and motivated and enjoyed working with images and exploring the medium. He begun by identifying the big change in his life as the moment of arriving in Italy, but then found it difficult to pin down what exactly had changed, in what way, and how to render anything so big and contradictory in visuals. He thus decided to think of a particular experience he recognised as influential in opening his life to new possibilities, and identified the moment of his involvement with the Fandema group. Becoming a member of the group and engaging with its creative and social gatherings, and acting in its theatrical plays, had given him the possibility to socialise and learn from people from different origins (while for six years previous he only related to the Egyptian male community in his neighbourhood in Milan), to learn to write and enhance his confidence in expressing himself in Italian, and enjoy himself through art and play. The network of caring relationships he developed within the group had also proven decisive when the 2012 amnesty was declared and three other members of the group took legal responsibility over his case and arranged his bureaucratic papers. This was also done for Ali and Mahmoud. Mohamed had captured this transformation with a selection of four images:
The upper two photographs represented the life he lived before, characterised by monotony ("the same things everyday") and fear ("documents control").

Nothing was ever new, I spoke to the same people every day, the same language, and we all come from the same place anyway… so we sat there for hours and hours saying the same old stuff. (May 2014)

In order to illustrate the fear of being inspected by the police, Mohamed wished to depict himself continuously throwing glances around himself when walking in the street:

I wanted to get the shadows, that’s how I felt… and the cars passing by quickly. But then I wanted to show the actual thing that made me feel this way, how they stop their cars as if they found some criminal or something! (Ibid)
For him, the other two photographs were a representation of the changes the Fandema group had brought to his life: a new community of relationships (Friendship, Beauty, Freedom, Safety, Hugs, Joy) and an Italian official identity (Identity Documents). In both achievements Mohamed traced the possibility of recovering his dreams to finish his studies, of getting to know different people and travel the world.

Instead, Mahmoud used more evocative images to express how he felt after losing his father, whose death and burial he could not witness, as he was unable to return to Egypt without putting at risk his return to Italy. Being the person who taught him the practical skills Mahmoud used at work, he traced his father’s presence in his daily activities and mourned for his sudden loss by capturing photographs that acted as a metaphor of his teachings, and of his father’s presence through his irreversible absence (Sartre 1996:112, 277-80).

This is me. I took a picture of the hands that know how to do things thanks to his advice. Every time I do something that he taught me I feel safe. I also think that he taught me this thing for a day such as this…

Figure 4.3 Hands that know how to do - Mahmoud, May 2014
Here I took a picture of an electric panel.
Every time I look at this I remember how he used to work.
A good visible sign but also invisible because I see him, but in my imagination…

Figure 4.4 A good (in)visible sign - Mahmoud, May 2014

The participatory photographic workshop ended with an activity asking participants to project themselves into the future by writing a postcard to themselves, from themselves in a few years’ time. The photograph Mohamed chose as his “postcard from the future” was the one picturing his papers and his Italian school books (bottom right of figure 4.2), but to my surprise the message he wrote to himself presented a future that circumstance had denied him, but which he would be able to provide his siblings thanks to his work.

Tatoun 18/05/2018

Dear,
I am at home with all the family. I remember that sometime ago you wished to return and stay with the family. That you had your permit but you couldn’t go. Now I am with your brothers and sisters that are studying thanks to your help. They are doing now what you didn’t manage to do. You didn’t study, you only worked.
You did well.

(Mohamed)
The realisation that the long dreamed of legal status would not help him recover ten years lost in waiting had begun to dawn on him. What Mohamed now started to hope for was his return to his village so that his younger siblings could profit from his hard work and sacrifice. Recovering the past for the future to come was an imaginative activity that Mahmoud’s “postcard from the future” presented in an interesting and complex twist of temporalities.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4.5 The place where I find myself**

| Cairo, January 2011 | Mahmoud Hemida  
| Viale Jenner 46  
| Milano - Italia |

My dear Mahmoud,

I’m writing to you and you are in 2014. I’m in the place where I find myself. Every time I sail off on the boat, I hear the sound of water, I breathe the air of the Nile. I look at the reflections of the boat’s coloured lights on the water. I look around and I find my best friends with a lovely smile on their faces. I feel even better because I trust my friends. Hoping that this life will come back for you too. But this better life, better than the dreams you had, will return in 2024. Now you’re in Italy, but you shouldn’t be sad because life moves on, it doesn’t stop for anyone. Even if the pain remains always in the heart. I wish you a good life and everything you desire.

Mahmoud

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68 Mahmoud chose this photograph from the pictures I had shot for him during my visit in Egypt, to his first working place in Cairo.
Mahmoud decided to place a moment of his past experience, when as a teenager in Cairo he worked as a cabin boy on the Nile cruising boats, in the present (“I’m writing to you and you are in 2014”), as though he had never left Egypt, and projected it into the future, where he tells himself “this better life will return” in ten years’ time. He talks about his future by identifying a possible life that could have continued from an experience in the past.

The future as a tense belonging to the past is a realisation of how Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud experience their present in a complex web of temporalities. Their non-linear experience of time becomes particularly manifest when certain memories strike them, as will become apparent during the analysis of the following creative processes. Through performance and collaborative visual methods the fieldwork practice of this research has attempted to bring events and feelings from the past back to life, where the ‘subjunctive possibilities’ of unexperienced futures emerge simultaneously. The ‘staged encounters’ (Irving 2007) enabled by collaborative filmmaking after the obtainment of the residence permit, which reinvigorated my friends’ imagination with its promises of a future life (as one had dreamed of) have also been a way for me to access memory and imagination at ‘work’. The following part of this chapter will recall some details of Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past (1913-27) in the contingencies of walking in significant places of the past and being struck by ‘involuntary memories’. The acquisition of a legal status had put Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in search of ‘a lost time’, where occasionally there may have been a sense of (lost) time being regained. But this always came hand-in-hand with the realisation that other life possibilities had gone forever.

Collaborative filmmaking and animation

After the photographic workshop we travelled to film documentary footage following their wish to re-visit their first places of arrival in Italy. During these journeys I asked them to capture the most significant places in an image as they walked through them, and to talk about some of their memories and imaginary future possibilities associated with them in their improvised speech. The performative practice of walking and narrating has been used previously by Irving (2007) as a mnemonic method to create more suitable and creative ethnographic contexts “through which memories of death and disease in Uganda can be re-lived, in situ, against the backdrop of the actual locations where the original events
took place” (2007:186). Irving also asked his field participants to take photographs as they walked around their neighbourhoods in Kampala. Relying on the protagonists’ decisions of what to tell, where to go and what to capture visually, Irving explains, not only transforms our conventional informants into ‘collaborative co-researchers’, but also places ethnography in the subjunctive mode, where it becomes receptive to the instability of memory and of people’s circumstances. Amongst many memories, experiences and photographs, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud made specific choices by voluntarily or involuntarily discarding others. In the complex narrative thread composed of performed movements, the materiality of the environment, improvised speech and photographs, my ‘co-researchers’ were rendering certain memories and imaginations public by exposing what would have not been immediately accessible by sight and knowledge of the anthropologist and of the audience. The gaps between the photographs and stories told by Irving’s informants, ask for whoever assists to imaginatively recreate the experience for themselves. This research project involved the protagonists of the stories in a further creative exploration of some of those gaps, through the imaginative and expressive process of animation.

According to Peter Loizos, one of the major innovations brought by Jean Rouch to ethnographic filmmaking was to encourage his informants to improvise their acting in front of the camera in ‘ethnofictions’ (Sjöberg 2008; Stoller 1992) ‘to convey something fundamental about real lives’ (1993:50). Similar to psychoanalysis, protagonists of ethnofiction would make previously implicit information explicit (Sjöberg 2008) by a process Loizos called ‘projective improvisation’ (1993:50). When improvising what they say or do in front of the camera, the protagonists express what they would normally take for granted (Sjöberg 2008). As I filmed Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud react to places that had been meaningful for the beginning of their lives in Italy, I realised how the environment was triggering the associations my subjects were making. Similar to the process of ethnofiction, the situation triggered another experience they suddenly remembered, as the unforeseen environment and unrehearsed situation fed the imagination and gave life to new associations (Sjöberg 2009). My own participants engaged in a creative flow that was the outcome of the dialogic relationship between their material surroundings and their subconscious, and also an interplay between memories and imaginings. The photographs from these journeys attempted to capture a still image of this free flow which would have been very difficult to visualise there and then without interrupting their creative momentum.
In exploring the intangible dimensions of people’s everyday lives, as social scientists, we should perhaps engage in a more ‘adventurous relationship to the real’ (Henley 2010: XIV), as Rouch did using improvised filmmaking and his actors’ projective improvisation and fantasy. He often blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction as his ethnographic filmmaking documented the manifestations of the surreal in forms of the real, in order to produce what he poetically described as ‘a postcard at the service of the imaginary’ (Fieschi and Téchiné 1967:19). Similar achievements have been echoed by scholars in animation studies (Skoller 2011; Wells 1998; Ward 2006; Honness Roe 2011; Callus 2012), sustaining the argument that the rising interest and popular acceptance of the hybrid form of animated documentary signals a deepening awareness that the truth claims of non-fiction forms no longer reside in the ‘reality effects’ of the photographic trace, but rather:

in a developing understanding that the realities that surround us and the events that structure our present are not always visualizable, that their meanings are unclear, and that documentary evidence is not always possible, revealing or clarifying (Skoller 2011: 207).

Hence, the aesthetic and narrative re-elaboration of memories, feelings and imaginings associated with those places was carried out at a later stage of the research in a studio: a very different, confined and professionally-defined space. After making a careful selection, my informants used some of the images as the visual and storytelling basis of the painted animation thanks to the collaboration of Francesca Cogni, a professional animator who helped facilitate the process.

I argue for the use of documentary animation as a practice towards new anthropological directions of envisioning and working with people’s, not only migrants’, life stories, which need to encompass future and conditional tenses as much as they do the present and the past. Scholars in film studies, Alan Grossman and Àine O’Brien (2007) and visual anthropologist Steffen Köhn (2016), have argued that documentary film can be effective in bringing us close to the experience of people who have migrated, as it has the potential of questioning conventional representation by placing the protagonists themselves

69 In Henley 2010, XIV.
at ‘centre stage’, and thus facilitating “a deeper understanding of the lived, contradictory and at times ephemeral conditions shaping the lives of migrant subjects” (Grossman and O’Brien 2007: 6). It is my contention to add to this argument that animation in particular brings an innovative contribution to ordinary ethnographic practice and representations, as it creatively engages with people’s imaginative possibilities that often lie beyond our grasp. By belonging to a type of film that would not necessarily be of anthropological intent, animation offers the opportunity to expose ‘anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers to ways of using image and sound to create expressive, rather than realist, representations of aspects of human experience and discourse’ (Sarah Pink 2001: 24). It is in its power to penetrate an aspect of ‘reality’ we want to find access to, that social scientists can gain outstanding advantages. In Understanding Animation (1998), Paul Wells defines the penetrative character of the animated documentary as its ability to evoke internal spaces of being, to portray what is generally invisible to the naked eye. Thus, the animated film can become the very method that can help us identify and represent particular kinds of experience and perceptions which do not find adequate expression elsewhere. Being completely constructed, this film genre also indicates the limits of other methods and forms that claim to be more ‘objective’ and neutral, but whose truth claims have been highly critiqued and contested in post-colonial and postmodern theory.

The following ethnographic examples aim to show how my methodological experimentation has also been a way of tracing the ontological status of my participants’ imaginings of the future through creative practice. In the attempt to identify the forms that imaginative possibilities take in people’s experiences I will be asking some basic questions: Where do we find evidence? When do they become manifest? What qualities (physical, emotional, mood-like, etc.) do they have? And why do certain imaginings appear to some and not others?

**Ali**

During the legalisation process, my informants expressed the wish to film their return to their places of arrival in Italy. For Ali however, the decision of returning to Porto Nogaro, a port near Udine in northern Italy where he had abandoned the merchant ship he was working on, had to take into account how he felt about his present and how close he felt he was in
realising his dreams of the future. This place was invested with symbolic connotation due to the meanings ascribed to it through Ali’s narration of his past. Going back was not a simple action.

Although at the beginning he himself wished to travel soon after receiving the residence permit, his initial enthusiasm was soon deadened by the difficulty of finding a job in the midst of the Italian economic crisis. So our journey was postponed until Ali could tell me the right time had arrived.

I want to go to the port that brought me into Italy and say – “Bless this port!” – instead now I’m almost regretting having come. I want to go there as a complete man, as a man satisfied with himself. (Ali, March 2013)

Work and the ability to compare himself to the successful professional lives of his siblings and friends back home were fundamental to Ali’s conception of manhood. As he was still unemployed and only found some small temporary work here and there, Ali also started to feel a more important decision had to be made. One of the most important opportunities the newly gained permit offered was to travel and visit family back home in Egypt. Following the first visit to his village, Qasabi, made possible by his newly acquired documents, Ali often compared himself to his friends and siblings back home who had migrated to better destinations, and had built houses for themselves, got married and were bringing up their first child. Consequently, he would plunge into a state of depression and all his hardship would appear senseless. That is when he would remind himself of another life he could be leading elsewhere, if only he hadn’t lost all this precious time waiting for something to happen in Milan.

A year later, when Ali was managing two different jobs, we finally arranged to shoot in and around Porto Nogaro. We decided to shoot at dawn, close to the time he had escaped, and his excitement was evident by the detail and drama he put into his narration. He moved swiftly amongst the goods on the quay, along the wall, beyond the gates, behind the bushes, re-living the excitement of that moment he had bravely taken hold of his life. At times he would stop, take a picture of a specific place and think aloud: “Why didn’t I go right instead of left? Why did I take this street down? I don’t know myself…” As we retraced Ali’s escape, his body began to stiffen and his movements became quicker and quicker. Darkness,
the fear and the excitement of that moment are all physical and emotional perceptions that Ali remembered and asked me (and the audience) to imagine while he was walking down the street he took during his escape outside Porto Nogaro. It is by walking and by suddenly accelerating his movements that he remembered what he was feeling and what went through his mind, recalling Grotowski’s understanding of memories as being “physical reactions”.

“It is our skin which has not forgotten, our eyes which have not forgotten. What we have heard can still resound within us.” ([1968] 1969: 185-86)

“It is not that the body remembers. The body itself is memory.” (1979:133)\textsuperscript{70}

For a moment Ali would look ahead, then suddenly look back towards the port, until we finally came to the first side street he took during his escape:

From this point onwards we stopped looking at the port. From this street it started… this line separates that side \textit{[the side of the port]} from this side with its future. Past and future. The street if you look at it from here, it doesn’t tell you anything. Because it was exactly like this, empty and dark. You’re entering a street as if you were entering a forest. In darkness, there was no light.

Ali photographed the street as he remembered it (Figure 4.6) and some months later, when he was animating that moment, he drew what suddenly crossed his mind when a set of car headlights pointed his direction.

\textsuperscript{70} both references in in Schechner 2015: 178
Without knowing whether or not it was a police car, as soon as he noticed the lights his imagination drew three possible future scenarios. If caught, he would either be sent back to the ship, imprisoned or repatriated.

The technique, which would enable Ali to draw over the image he had captured, without altering it, was to paint on glass. We built a light box together, composed of a drawer, a small table lamp and a glass picture frame. The photograph, printed in black and white to allow the contrast of the coloured animation to emerge further, was attached to the interior side of the glass, providing a constant reference to Ali’s drawings. A still camera, fixed to a tripod and tilted down towards the frame, was connected to the computer and to the software, which commanded the shutter to close when the frame was ready to be photographed. The image then was automatically imported onto the software’s timeline (Figure 4.7).
While animating, to convey how intensely he experienced his imaginative possibilities at that given moment, Ali wiped his body from his original position (in the street, when he first saw the car lights), and re-drew it directly into his imaginative ‘bubble’. Once again indicating that the ‘reality’ of his imagination existed not just in abstract terms, but was made present and embodied through his nervous system.

In order to avoid being caught and identified, Ali got rid of his Egyptian passport in the bushes, thus anticipating the future in a present action. Ali’s movements were oriented towards the future, recalling Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of ‘reality’ as not fully belonging to the present but always lying ‘further on’ (1968: 401). By predicting what could have happened, Ali legislated his behaviour. His quick decision-making, as much as his experience as a whole, was influenced by the stories he heard from acquaintances who had previously taken such a risk and knew how to warn and advise others. Out of repetition and exchange, stories of people crossing borders illegally have become part of a collective history, which acts as reference for the experiences of new migrants. David Carr would say that the past is also present to us in the world we experience. As a phenomenologist he argues that the historical past is not just the subject matter of historians, a time we can ‘bracket’ away from our present. We live the historical past, as we have a ‘non-thematic’ or ‘pre-
thematic’ awareness of it, which means that it acts as a horizon and “background for our present experience, or our experience of the present” (1986: 3).

Similarly, I argue the future acts upon our present by functioning as a ‘foreground’ to our everyday experience. In Ali, the consequences of getting caught were vividly transformed into a bodily experience by his imagination of a possible near future. Hence we could say it is part of the human condition to legislate, decide, perceive and narrate as though the future was already part of our lived experience. As Ricouer (1984) has argued, our experience of time is essentially characterised by ‘discordance’: the present is past at the same time as it is projected forward, and then, as other examples from the field will show, accompanied by other conditional possibilities. It is through narrative (in the form of story and storytelling, and here also of documentary animation) that we bring ‘concord’ to the dissonance, as it is our primary way of organising our experience of time. Therefore, not only can narrative elucidate our pre-theoretical past (Carr 1986: 5), but it can also do the same with our imagined possibilities of the future.

As Ali and I returned to the harbour from the side street he had thrown his passport and uniform, he stopped again in front of the main entrance to the port and told me that he now wanted to take another picture:

This time it’s not a picture of the past. This picture is for the future. [...] I don’t want to enter this port on foot again. I want to enter it with my own car. Perhaps with the shipment papers of some goods. Which goods, I don’t know. The important thing is to do a job like that. I would love to do it. (It was Tomorrow, 49:17 mins)

He later added that his newly acquired residence permit allowed him to project himself and capture this image of the future. When animating this picture and re-claiming some sort of belonging to the place, Ali decided to rename the port with his name (Figure 4.8).
Jackson recognizes the existential qualities of storytelling ‘as a vital strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances’ (2002: 15). Ali’s wishful animated anecdote about his future enabled him to actively re-elaborate events in a story, and to no longer live those events in passivity.

Mohamed

Mohamed had often wished to distinguish himself from fellow villagers who had migrated to Italy like him by asserting that what motivated him to cross the sea was to achieve something for himself, to study and gain experience of the world. The idea of making money to show off back home, through brand new cars and newly built houses, was certainly part of the collective motivation of migrating, but during the legalisation process, his original dream of getting himself an education in Europe became more and more compelling.

Mohamed disembarked in Sicily, at the harbour of Agrigento at the age of seventeen. Ten years had passed before he managed to return to the places he had first seen with the
eyes of a much younger and inexperienced man. Even so, the memories of those days were still so fresh and vivid, and he had become nervous and anxious about our journey. He told me he was worried about the possibility of not being able to recognise the places he had passed through, but also, as evident in the reflections that emerged while we were filming, he was becoming uncomfortable with the idea of coming to terms with what had happened in his life since then. He was aware of the fact that his dreams as a teenager, which had driven him to undertake such a life-threatening and transformational journey, did not coincide in the least with what had actually taken place. As soon as we visited the harbour and walked through the streets, Mohamed became visibly excited and emotional. He photographed the harbour and the pier where he first set foot.

Then he wished to visit the centre for minors where he had spent fifteen days before deciding to escape to reach Milan, which was his final destination. That place, he realised, was where he could have started a completely different life had he decided to stay and not escape. If only he had understood he had the chance of getting some schooling and a temporary paper, perhaps then he would have found the patience to wait. But he wished to be free to decide for himself, ‘without feeling obliged to stay closed up in that place in the middle of nowhere...’ From on the hill where the reception centre was, he looked down at the view surrounding us: an endless succession of fields of sun-burnt grass, greenhouses and dusty countryside roads disappearing behind rocky hills covered by very little vegetation. “I couldn’t understand the reason why they were keeping me here, to spend my days playing football, watching TV, chatting...”71 “I didn’t come here to be comfortable”72. Mahmoud also said when we filmed outside his reception centre in Naro (32 km inland from Agrigento): “I came here to work, to run, to grab life!” echoing in front of the camera the sense of adventure he had put into the retelling of his journey during the storytelling night.

But now we were retracing Mohamed’s steps, the suspicion that things could have taken a much easier route if he had acted differently began to haunt him. While we were walking around the buildings where other young people were being lodged, he would talk to a social worker and myself and say:

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71 Mohamed, rushes of documentary, July 2014.
72 It was Tomorrow, 29:50 mins
If I only knew it was going to be so hard after I escaped… that I was going to lose ten years of my life… no, I should’ve stayed! Now I know it for sure. Things would be different now…

(Mohamed, July 2014)

Figure 4.9 Mohamed imagines receiving his residence permit at the reception centre

Here, Mohamed came face-to-face with his other possible life, where he would have had the chance to learn the language, create contacts, and not live as an outcast as he had done for ten years (Figure 4.9). This imaginary life has no doubt accompanied Mohamed all the time, as when he was asked about the future, he would plunge into confusion and sadness. He realised he had lost too much of his youth, which was the time appropriate according to him for dreams and for developing his knowledge. On top of that, he lamented the idea of having lost proximity to his family and his people, to the person he once was, and how now he was unable to change his situation. Jackson also encountered similar feelings and perceptions in his Sierra Leonean informants: “Constant exposure to a negative social
environment will easily lead one […] to a nagging guilt that the price of one’s own improved chances in life is the loss of one’s kith and kin and one’s heritage” (2008: 70).

On the evening following the visit to the reception centre, Mohamed wished to return to the harbour. He wanted to be there as the sun was setting and the lights of the port and the town above were lighting up. Just as it was when he arrived ten years ago. He told me about a prayer he promised to make when he was in the middle of the sea, if God granted him the survival of the crossing. But when he arrived he was shocked by the amount of journalists with their cameras waiting for them on the pier. At first he was puzzled and couldn’t understand:

I thought we were going to land on a desert, where there was nothing and everyone could just do what they wanted. But, who were they all? What was so interesting about us, why are they so interested in us? (Mohamed, July 2014)

When he also saw the police waiting for them, he said: “I understood immediately we were going to end up in the newspapers as criminals”. When he put his feet on the ground, he remembered by walking along that pier, that he was unable to stand, that he felt the earth was moving just like the waves of the sea. He told me it took him the whole night to re-establish a balance on land. The continuity in Mohamed’s physical perception, after three days at sea, was expressed in his animation of the moment of disembarking.

He couldn’t tell me the exact reason he didn’t keep his promise, but he described how he was helped to come off the boat and gathered into a warehouse with 204 fellow travellers, and told to wait and not move. He said “I simply couldn’t think of myself in that moment, but I thought of the situation, of what was happening all around me in that moment.” As if the shock, excitement and confusion of that moment, along with seeing the authorities, had taken control over his actions, paralysing his ability to sense himself and act with his own will.

On his return to that same place ten years later, I asked him whether there was something specific he would have liked to do in the harbour; a metaphorical action of some sort in order to convey for the film something we would have been unable to see otherwise. He decided to take the opportunity of the film to perform the prayer. The day after, he asked to watch that moment again in order to see whether it was visible that he felt different and more relaxed after the prayer. The promise he wanted to keep was not just of praying and
thanking God for having granted him life on a journey where he could have not survived, but also to act upon that chance he had been given. He said:

You can’t do anything in the sea, but the sea pushes you on the land, it pushes you to move, and not stay still. To build something, to build yourself, to learn, to meet people, to live all the possible life, for someone who really wants to build his own life. […] So, after [remembering] all these thoughts that I had while crossing the sea, I realise I wish to go back. To have an experience as the one that I had before. So that it could make me think, really, how dear the land is. In order not to waste time just like that. And spend time for nothing. Perhaps if I could go back I could live the life that I wished for. Really, I feel I need another journey like this one, to make me think again of what I can do. ‘Cause problems come to make you stronger, stronger in the sense of giving you courage to move on, to build, to have new thoughts. For me it was like this really. […] I really don’t know if I have to repeat a journey like the one I did, or if I can start thinking of this from here too. (It was Tomorrow, 50:33 mins)

The film and the ‘staged’ interior monologue weren’t just giving him the opportunity to remember the thoughts he had, but also to consider and desire to act upon them in the present and in the future. After his emotional outburst Mohamed felt more relaxed, but also troubled by realising “how much time I’ve lost.” The only way to regain lost time and think about the future was expressed by repeating the crossing again, unless the imaginative journey in the past he had just narrated in front of the camera could have triggered some change in him. In order to help him come closer to the vision he had of himself retaking that journey, and metaphorically retaking hold of his life, I proposed for him to take a boat and go out in the sea. Mohamed had contrasting feelings while facing the blue horizon as the waves crashed against the boat’s prow, where he sat in a similar position to the one he was in during the Mediterranean crossing. He sat in silence, at times looking back worried, at times bursting into laughter. He seemed to enjoy it but at the same time looked a bit lost. In order to give the film an unsettling ending, I thought of leaving the audience with this last scene, where Mohamed was metaphorically back on the boat fishing out the imaginative thoughts that could have given him a possible new beginning.
Mahmoud

Mahmoud, after getting his papers, wished to go back to visit his family because, as he said, not being able to return for so long was a defining aspect of being, or becoming, a migrant. Therefore, as a defining feature of an undocumented migrant’s identity, Mahmoud believed that at the same time as losing the proximity to their own familiar people and places, migrants were also losing a part of their future, which would have included being able to visit their families when they wished, and to feel connected to their places of origin. In Mohamed’s and Mahmoud’s words (during the storytelling, photography workshop and film shooting) it is possible to trace the sense of loss they developed for a future they will never get to know.

Mahmoud boarded a plane for the first time in his life with me, on our flight to Lampedusa, a now famous island in the middle of the Mediterranean where so many undocumented migrants disembark on after following the smuggling routes. Since Lampedusa is the southernmost part of Italy, and the closest European island to the African continent, many boats carrying undocumented migrants and asylum seekers that enter international waters try to disembark there or in Sicily, and end up being detected by the Italian coastal guards.

In April 2015, Lampedusa was the site of one of the most tragic shipwrecks in the post-war history of the Mediterranean, when more than 900 immigrants drowned. Mahmoud had been on a similar journey, six years before, when he too was only seventeen. While we were in Lampedusa he expressed the desire to film the dawn from a cliff. He said it was so lovely to observe the sea from land:

It’s not like being in the middle of the sea, on a small boat with 40 people, where all you can see is the sea. There, the water comes and hits you, there’s no need to go and touch it… the water is beautiful from a beautiful beach, from a mountain, from a big nice ship! (July 2014)

One of the images we photographed on that cliff ended up on our animation light box. Mahmoud thought he could tell part of the story of the crossing by animating the photograph of himself looking at the sea (Figure 4.10). Francesca, our professional animator, asked him
whether he wanted to start from the ‘beautiful sea, seen from land’, in order to recall what he had said at the time, so he decided to start the animation with the sun rising.

![Image of the beautiful sea, seen from land – Mahmoud, July 2014]

The attention he gave to detail was impressive. The more Francesca and I tried to simplify the act of drawing, the more Mahmoud came up with elaborate aesthetic ideas. In the picture he stood there still, as in real life, and watched. It was not until the sun moved up in the sky that he moved his arms into a relaxed position of admiration. Then slowly, as he remembered the quality of the sea when he saw it from the boat, his colours became thicker, and the sea begun to surround him. Suddenly he stopped and said: “I don’t remember anything anymore.” We persisted for a while, asking him questions that might help unblock his memory: “What happened there? What part of the story would you like to tell now?” He replied:

While I was there I didn’t wish to keep these memories; I didn’t want them to stay with me. It was horrible… It took me so long to forget, and now you come and ask me to tell you the story. (January 2015)

After a reflective pause, we felt we had to reassure Mahmoud and clarify that the purpose of our work was not to dig out discomforting traumatic memories. Although I knew Mahmoud
very well, and had previously discussed my ethical concerns with Francesca and all participants of this research, I felt obliged to remind him there was no need for us to continue work on this story if he wished to stop. The fact that he resisted giving testimony to what had happened was an integral part of the process and he had the freedom to twist or conclude the story in any way he preferred. Moreover, the creative practices we had been engaging with had been used ethically so my participants could co-direct their narration and use fiction and metaphors whenever they wished to avoid descriptive accounts of troublesome experiences.

Finally, Mahmud abandoned the brush, and coloured his fingers with some paint and began to smudge the colours and the lines on the picture. As he began mixing the colours little by little an image seemed to start emerging.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 4.11 *Mum and Dad* - Mahmoud, January 2015

Slowly, they became visible. Two faces, with watery eyes and contours. Mahmoud then spoke up: “It’s mum and dad. They are crying for their son who’s in the middle of the sea.”

I only realised later that I had learned something very valuable from Mahmoud about the relationship we had developed throughout our research. The fact that he had control over the animation process also helped him feel in the right position to re-negotiate and resist the
claims Francesca and I could have made about his process of remembering, and the ways in which he would have recounted this experience in the future. What was more relevant to him was not the exact description of his terrifying journey but the devastating effects it must have had in his parents’ thoughts and feelings. Was he trying to relive this experience as seen through the teary eyes of his parents? Did his imagining of their faces and worries prevail over his individual recollection of the crossing? It can be argued that, deciding to substitute his personal perspective with theirs, he was making a claim over whose experience he believed best represented the drama of that moment.

In analysing the process of making Running for Freedom (2003/2004), a film about refugees coming to London, Piotrowska makes an argument for hybrid forms to be used for representing, and I would add, for researching people’s traumatic memories and experiences. In asking herself the question of what happens when our subjects’ narrative breaks down, she realises that “Some things, that are too intimate or too traumatic are best left alone – or to fiction” (2011: 337). By using live action together with animation she allowed for the fictional and symbolic recuperation of language, as her participants found a way of telling part of their story. If it weren’t for animation, Mahmoud would most probably have felt much more uneasy. But he had always been keen to tell and share his own experience in the form of stories. He would often tell me how he wished to bring part of his documentary to his family in Egypt, and share it with his own children in the future. Even enriched by fictional or metaphorical content, he would always refer to the account he made as ‘real’. Post-structuralist philosopher Jaques Derrida (200073) offers a defence of fictionalised accounts based on lived experience, which attempts to bring fantasies and fears closer to one’s life experiences. Animation within documentary presents this possibility as it is completely ‘created’ by work of the imagination. Moreover, lies, fiction and imagination have the potentiality of creating something ‘anew’ (Ricoeur 1984), which takes us safely beyond an uncomfortable, and often unethical, research of truth claims. This isn’t to say, Paul Ward warns us, that the claims represented are thereby completely invalid. On the contrary, it might well be the case that an animated documentary manages to reveal more of the “reality” of a situation than any number of live-action documentaries. Animated documentaries want to engage with the world in all its complexity and contradiction (2006: 89).

73 In Piotrowska 2011: 338.
When reflecting on the process of animating, Mahmoud told us he hadn’t imagined it would turn out the way it did. Every time he was adding something, he said the next step would come into his mind by itself, appearing into his imagination. After the workshop, Francesca added something she herself had realised while working with this technique:

This technique enables imaginary perceptions to emerge step by step as one draws… Sometimes I get so immersed, imagining my characters and their actions, that then it’s kind of automatic for me to do certain things that I wouldn’t have seen otherwise.

The process facilitated by Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s animations provided me with an insight into how imaginative flights of fancy (away from the factual reality of what actually happened) are perceived by my informants as more truthful to their recollections and experiences. The preparation of the animation enabled us to see how imagination comes into being through the process of making, and through dialogue. Imagination therefore is a process, but at the same time, the product of that process. Animations have been included into the documentary as representations of the process that the authors engaged in, but also as aesthetic products that aim to elicit the cooperation of the audience’s imagination, in order to bridge the gap between the narrative and the more realistic, documentary images.
Summary and Conclusion

Working closely with the stories people tell others, themselves and me, this research has tried to understand the impact of the imagination on experience, particularly migrants’ interpretation of their experiences.

This thesis has experimented with a variety of creative practices in order to explore the forms that imaginative horizons may take at critical times in participants’ lives. This was in order to avoid fixing aspects of people’s interiorities that are constantly changing, and sometimes confusing and contradicting. By using stories, theatrical improvisation, animation and reflective practice I intended to bring the complexities and contradictions which emerged during fieldwork into the final outputs of this research: into its text and the documentary film. Though imaginative horizons resist articulation, as Crapanzano warns, I argue that we have a moral and political responsibility to bring these existential possibilities back to life in texts and visual representations by pushing the boundaries of proximity and distance between the researcher and informants during fieldwork, and between the theatre or film protagonists and the audience.

The role of imagination in experiences of migration

According to phenomenological and existential anthropology, imagination always accompanies experience. Irving has argued that acknowledging the imagination is vital if anthropologists wish to come to a more immediate understanding of people’s experiences, as to ignore “the empirical reality and individuality of their interior and imaginative lifeworlds is to risk only telling half the story of human life” (2016). Imagination in this research is generally understood as those “horizons” or “auras” which lie beyond what is available to our immediate perception of reality, but which form and inform our relationship to it. Supported by the arguments of scholars such as Vincent Crapanzano (2004), Michael Jackson (2008; 2012) and Nigel Rapport (2015), I have argued that (social) scientists need to take the role of imagination seriously in analytical consideration as it is central to determining what people experience and how they interpret those experiences.

An investigation into imaginative horizons is particularly crucial in order to understand people’s actions and the reasons behind them, or perhaps even “ahead of” action, in terms of decisions that may be life changing as a consequence.
More specifically, by working on the migratory experiences and life-stories of three Egyptian men, I have come to understand how their imaginations of the future have propelled them, on occasion, to move decisively, and paralyzed them in others. The way my participants have imagined their possible futures has also fundamentally affected the way they construct their memories of the past and their larger life stories in general.

Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud come from Qasabi and Tatoun, two villages among many rural villages highly affected by emigration. They crossed the Mediterranean illegally to reach Italy as minors, but their fantasies about what lay beyond the sea had been ingrained into their experience long before the act of crossing. Studies carried out in the so called “sending villages”, from which people have migrated in great numbers, have explained how migration has become the most powerful way to imagine a liveable life. Returning migrants telling their stories and symbols of success have fuelled young people’s imaginations of what lies beyond the horizon.

In Egyptian rural villages, since Sadat’s presidency in the 70s, economic liberalisation and the development of international labour migration has given rise to new private and individually-run initiatives. The rise in independent economic activity in agriculture and small-scale commerce running in parallel with state-controlled cooperatives, were also being fostered by labour migration to the Arab countries. The advent of modernity and the liberalisation of the economy, even in the poorest areas of the country, offered even small landless peasants a chance to save and accumulate capital for the first time in history. However Mubarak’s agrarian reform in the 90s made it almost impossible for rural villagers to ensure their living through agriculture and minor trade, as the price of land rent suddenly tripllicated. This led to increased pressure on the suddenly landless, indebted and impoverished families to look for their subsistence elsewhere, which resulted in an increase of urban and international migration directed towards Europe due to the political instability of countries in the Gulf. Concurrently, the Schengen agreement in 1991 restricted the possibility of Egyptians gaining European visas to travel. After unsuccessful attempts at obtaining a job or education at home, both in the public and private professional sectors, which have become regulated by corrupt networks, nepotism and clientelism, people who wished to migrate were forced to find alternative, and often illegal ways, to reach their countries of destination. Schielke (2008) has noted how the introduction of satellite TV and the internet in the early 2000s, with their presentation of models of life with greater
possibilities, has further influenced the collective imagination in rural areas and enhanced people’s desire to belong to a more urban and cosmopolitan middle class. The creation of a specific imaginary modern life combined with increasing socio-economic obstacles for lower-middle class people to fulfil these aspirations caused a widespread sense of immobility and frustration in rural villages, and in the deprived peripheries of the largest cities. It is from within these conditions, where people feel stuck and deprived of the right to access the imagined world propagated by globalisation and re-enforced by new houses constructed by the remittances of successful migrants, that the need to migrate by whatever means available gains further urgency.

Hage’s distinction between existential and physical mobility (2005) has been particularly useful in order to understand the social dynamics that cause the particular movement of migration. People have a sense of existential mobility as long as they feel they are “moving forward” in life. Structural conditions that render lives uninhabitable and restrict the possibility for socio-economic advancement cause a sense of stagnancy, a sense of life “fading” or being “wasted”. According to Hage’s argument, when people experience a crisis in their sense of existential mobility, they begin to fantasise about other possible lives elsewhere and decide to move physically, to the point of risking their lives by crossing borders illegally, as the experiences of Mohamed and Mahmoud have demonstrated. The suffering of migrants, or following Mahmoud’s definition, the condition that turns a traveller into a migrant, is when people realise after some years in the new country that they have again ended up in a life with no sense of existential progression, and where the stigma of ‘failure’ impedes them from making a return to their villages.

Therefore I have made the case for such perilous journeys as the risky sea crossings on hazardous boats to be understood as ‘turning points’ (Lucht 2012) or ‘critical events’ (Das 1997) in the lives of migrants. These turning points create a rupture, as described by Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in their stories, between a life-before and a life-after that event. Though the heavily militarised borders of Europe are meant to delimit, confine and exclude, from the point of view of my interlocutors borders represent an opportunity “to enter another life”, “to be pushed to move on land” and “to build a future”. These imaginations have allowed Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud to defy migration laws through a journey that was experienced and interpreted through contrasting and contradictory feelings. On one hand the crossing provided them with a sense of agency, while on the other it was life threatening,
considered unlawful and its conditions unsettled the certainties of their cosmological order, defining them as “intruders”, “criminals” and “victims” according to existing European bureaucratic states and political discourse. Indeed, I have argued that the very specific conditions of how my informants travelled and landed on Italian soil influenced quite significantly who (in its plurality) they perceived they were, and their accompanying existential possibilities.

This research takes in consideration another “critical event” which took place during fieldwork and which altered the way my participants articulated their life trajectories. The legalisation process repopulated their future with dreams, some of which were recovered from the past. The contingencies of that historical moment offered me the opportunity to explore Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s imaginative horizons, and the ways in which they related to the experiences of their immediate reality, imbued in the stories they constructed.

Crapanzano (2004) points out that the intangible and elusive quality of imaginative horizons is what renders them resistant to full articulation. Since people’s interior lifeworlds cannot be accessed in any autonomous or objective way, they pose a challenge to conventional methods in anthropology which rely heavily on observation, text and interview. These practices are often too static and betray the incomplete, transitory and ever-changing nature of people’s imaginings. Having understood the interrelation between imagination and reality in defining experiences and stories of movement and migration, the aim of this practice-based research has been to explore the workings of imaginative processes by engaging my informants in a shared enquiry through experimental methods proposed as an enrichment of social qualitative research.

The question of methodology and reflexive practice

This thesis started by looking at ontological questions concerning the qualities that certain imaginings have in the lived experiences of people who have risked their lives to reach certain imagined “horizons”. However, from chapter three onwards it takes a definite epistemological turn by asking how we as social researchers can gain access to a realm of human existence that “resists full articulation”, is intangible and ever changing? The quest for new methodological approaches in the social sciences aims to show that the imagination
is not merely an abstract product of people’s consciousness, but is embodied and embedded in people’s present actions and in their intersubjective exchange with others (human or non-human), with the environment and with objects. Through its methodological experimentation and its theoretical questioning, this practice-based research has developed an approach to knowledge, memory and imagination that acknowledges them as emergent and constructed through physical and relational processes. It belongs to an established trend in the social sciences and humanities that focuses on the senses, on individual experience, on ways of knowing, being, imagining and remembering that may find expression in forms beyond words. In this sense, the connections and collaborations between contemporary arts practice and anthropology have proved fruitful in opening social research in more creative epistemological directions.

My ethnographic practice began by experimenting with theatre and storytelling, using my professional experience as a community theatre facilitator and Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s previous experience as members of the Fandema theatre group. Thanks to their creative and collective “flow”, improvisation and narrative exercises gave me the opportunity to engage my participants in a shared exploration of their experiences, perceptions and fantasies of the future. The “subjunctive possibility” of theatre and storytelling enabled my participants to experience certain things anew and to reflect on them in a cycle of action-reflection. Boal’s postulation of theatre as “telescopic” (1995) has also been useful, as theatre has the capacity to go into more detailed accounts of events and of the actors’ experiences. But from the outcomes of the workshop we understood that researcher-practitioners should strike a careful balance between the autobiographical and more fictional, poetic and metaphorical techniques. An emphasis on “reality” limits participants’ imaginative abilities and goes against the purpose of theatre in creating space for alternative realities to the world in which we are engaged in the present (Pendergast and Saxon 2015). Several scholars (Gallagher 2007; Thompson 2009; Jeffers 2012) in theatre and performance studies have warned practitioners against the “reality syndrome”, the imperative of narrative and testimony, as these approaches to participants’ experiences and stories may not only paralyse imaginative processes but also, and more importantly, re-traumatize the people involved.

From what we learned in the theatre workshop, we proceeded to experiment by organising storytelling nights, where in collaboration with my participants as co-researchers, we devised a series of workshop-events involving intimate groups of participant-audiences. Through the telling of stories belonging to their religious tradition, Mohamed and Ali, who
had previously worked on their stories in the theatre workshops, had the possibility of sharing moral stories that belonged to their collective imaginary with people who didn’t belong to the same cultural and religious background. Mahmoud instead decided to craft the experience of his journey taking him from his village in Egypt to join his brother in Milan, by using a variety of poetic and fictional artifices. The participatory aspect of the storytelling events involved the audience in the retelling of stories that had been triggered by the theme or questions of the main story. The retelling was also carried out through the creation of artwork or theatre improvisations, and was then followed by an open reflective discussion. Within this carefully but not too rigidly designed ethnographic context and during the processes preceding it, we explored the metaphors, and connections to non-autobiographical stories that my co-researchers felt expressed something truer about their experiences and imaginations. The aim of the stories told was to search for connections, through ‘dialogic performances’, that would bring the audience and the storyteller to ‘deeply sense the other’ (Conquergood 1985). The reflective context created by the group further enriched the process as it allowed different people’s thoughts and stories to feed from one another, while also opening up the possibility for participants to ask questions of each other, and discuss the contradictory feelings and thoughts that may inhabit certain decisions and actions.

After a year had passed since the acquisition of their legal status, the second stage of our fieldwork practice was characterised by the experimentation of audio-visual methods beginning with a participatory photography workshop that engaged Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud in capturing their own images to explore a broad theme such as ‘change’. The photographic stories that emerged brought up new dilemmas and the presence (or sudden loss) of significant relationships that changed the way my friends were interpreting their past, present and future. Their inconsistent attendance to the workshop allowed me to reflect on the nature of collaborative relationships with one’s research participants, as concepts such as ‘collaboration’, ‘participation’, ‘co-creation’ may often disguise the tensions and conflicts that are common to the majority of relationships in the field. Instead of smooth collaboration, it sometimes felt like a real struggle to keep my participants on board with the project, as at times their need to deal with worries and work commitments had the upper hand, and I often felt I had to put our research demands aside in order to support them as a friend. This is not to say that collaboration is not possible, but that it needs to include quite a bit of diplomacy and often to be negotiated. This might be challenging to the solitary way anthropologists are traditionally expected to carry out their fieldwork, especially when engaging field participants in creative processes which are facilitated by the researcher. I suggest using the
support of another colleague where possible, and of workshop groups and teams, to alleviate
the possible tensions by de-centering the locus of dialogue as only existing between the
researcher and researched. This often adds to the professional quality of the process and its
outcome, and may create a mediation in terms of field relationships that may otherwise
become particularly intense.

The next creative phase was proposed by my participants themselves, and involved
shooting documentary footage during our return to their first places of arrival in Italy after
the crossing. During our collaborative filmmaking I encouraged Ali, Mohamed and
Mahmoud to improvise their narration, while walking around the places that belonged to
their past and taking photographs of specific memories or fantasies the environment inspired
them with. By using the process of ‘projective improvisation’ as present in Rouch’s
ethnofiction, I filmed the protagonists as they instinctively reacted to the environment and,
in their improvised narration, previously implicit information became explicit (Sjöberg
were made regarding other existential paths as alternatives to the life lived. The gap between
the stories told and the empty places through which the actors moved is consciously
reproduced in order to invite the audience to recreate these experiences in their imagination.
The final creative process entailed the imaginative exploration of those ‘gaps’ through
participatory animation, where Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud were once again making the
decisions over what story to tell, how to tell it and how to transform it. In its very ability to
penetrate aspects of reality, animation can evoke imaginative spaces of being, which would
normally be inaccessible to observation alone. I have argued that anthropological films may
include what is normally difficult to grasp in people’s consciousness through animation. The
reflections and considerations that emerged from the ethnographic context created by the
filmmaking and animation process have led me as a researcher to recognise the value of the
animated film as a creative method. It is capable of venturing within the realm of future
existential possibilities, which are crucial in providing guidance and acting as a reference in
the lives of those who have experienced migration. The animation process has shed light
onto the workings of imaginings related to possible futures and the impact these may have
on people’s lived experience and decision-making. Furthermore, animation has provided
Ali, Mahmoud and Mohamed with a narrative form that gave them the creative possibility
to reproduce the experience of different temporal tenses, sometimes overlaying or
complementing one another, or on other occasions, conflicting and contrasting. Due to its
very nature, this hybrid form also has a tendency to facilitate the development of collaborative working methods, which is beneficial for all anthropological methods. Ward considers this a vital point when we consider that the topics of animated documentaries are precisely the supposedly incommunicable thoughts and concepts belonging to people’s experiences and perceptions. This is the reason these films could not exist without the direct involvement of the people they ‘are about’ (Ward 2006: 94). One could say that making an animated documentary is a perfect fit for the anthropological agenda, as “these films are not just attractions, they are forms of knowledge” (Skoller 2011: 209). Even more so, during the animation stage, we went through a learning process together in which we saw memories and imaginings taking completely unexpected forms to us, and where knowledge was negotiated and collaboratively created. Experience, memory, imagination, future perceptions and being are thus not only ‘emplaced’ (Casey 1993; Antze and Lambek 1996; Irving 2007; Köhn 2016) but also emerge out of the specific practices (in this case performance, photography, filmmaking, animation) that (in)form the intersubjective exchange between researcher and field participants.

Creative practice in the study of migration

“The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant.” These are the opening words to The Figure of the Migrant (2015) by political philosopher Thomas Nail, confirming the view of many social scientists whose work has attempted to analyse and understand the effects of modernisation and globalisation. Modernity and migration are so interrelated as to be compared by Bauman as “twin brothers, almost siamese, under touchable.” Migration has become very topical both within academia and in public and political discourse across the media, influencing public and private funding for further research, policymaking and social action. The topic also continues to inspire significant cultural production in the arts.

75 For instance, the new Migration Lab at the University of Manchester: http://www.migrationlab.manchester.ac.uk/
77 A complete list of works is beyond the capacities of this thesis, but I have mentioned a few useful references in footnotes 25, 26 and 27 of Chapter 3. Readers could refer to Steffen Kohn’s publication (2016) for an
In fact, one may even wonder if there is anything new to say and how it may affect the ongoing “plight” of migrants along, and even within, the borders of Europe. I have argued in this thesis that any cultural and social scientific production dealing with the theme of migration cannot, and should not, avoid its human and political responsibilities towards the protagonists themselves. We should ask ourselves how the stories and representations produced in co-creation with our participants intend to affect public perception and collective imaginaries, both in host and sending countries. This practice-based doctoral research aims to contribute to the understanding of experiences of migration by centring its analysis and representation on the personal stories and dilemmas of three of its protagonists. By inviting us to bear witness to people’s circumstances and imaginative lifeworlds, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud have given form to their stories through the narrations, performances and animations that “simultaneously transcend and exaggerate social and cultural borders between persons living in different parts of the world” (Irving 2007: 206). These barriers of difference, as Irving suggests, should not simply be seen as obstacles to social interaction and understanding, but as offering fertile ground for social renewal and change. Witnessing differences between, and within, us as promulgated through people’s stories and artwork generates a type of knowledge and appreciation that becomes a basis for engaging audiences, readers and viewers with the experiences of others without reducing them to bureaucratic categories and numbers. Recognising the contradiction inherent in people’s experiences of migration, and their movement as a physical, political and imaginative struggle against social inequality and murderous border policies, is a way for research and art practice to reclaim people’s humanity in the face of objectifying and exclusionary legal and bureaucratic procedures, social stereotyping and official narratives.

Creative practices, such as the ones explored in this research, are likely to develop an interventionist approach to the field as they might have a significant impact on participants (Sjöberg forthcoming). Making, exploring and transforming have aimed to create opportunities for experience and mutual discovery, rather than explanations of lived experience. Especially when working collaboratively with field participants on their consciousness, where imagination, aspirational dreams and fantasies play an important role,

overview of audio-visual work on the topic of migration; also these sites list a number of documentaries on the topic produced in Spain: http://desorg.org/titols/online/, in the US: https://www.macfound.org/press/article/migration-documentary-films/; Archivio delle Memorie Migranti in Italy also carries out significant artistic and scholarly work documenting migration: http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en; see also an article on the latest art production in Italy, in the Economist: http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2016/01/art-and-migration
interrogating our own (re)presentations and creating the necessary space to interrupt and challenge “the search for certainties that underpin much anthropological knowledge” (Ravetz 2007: 271) forms part of our responsibility towards our co-researchers’ disclosures and dilemmas. By examining “modes of contemporary art where ways of knowing are not about producing certainties” (ibid), Ravetz suggests there are situations in which anthropological production of knowledge should also open up a space for processes of knowing that are characterised by uncertainty. Inquiry should therefore find its starting point within experience (recognising that to a certain extent, we are also part of it as researchers), and in collaboration with the people we are studying. If traditional methods in social research run the risk of reifying and fixing people’s intangible and fleeting realms of existence, the contradiction and contrast between participants’ artworks and their verbalisation is fundamental. Pink and Hogan (2010) have recognised the potential of artworks to contradict the spoken word, and this thesis has attempted to identify moments when this occurred during the processes of storytelling, improvisation and animating. Such contradiction and the uncertainty that thence derives “offers ways of understanding interiority through an anthropological paradigm that views inner states as being in progress, rather than ever static.” (Pink & Hogan 2010: 160).

Human imagination itself has the ability to contradict reality, allowing space for other possibilities to take hold of our present. In his phenomenological account of imagination, Sartre (1940) notices that the key feature of our imaginative process is the ability of our mind to imagine what is not the case. This aspect vividly emerged out of the animation process where black and white photographs devoid of colour or of actions and emotions that were part of the experience, activated my participants’ memory and imagination to tell the story of what was not on the screen, and animate it. Mohamed told us that the photograph of the pier, for example, dragged him right into the situation and helped him imagine what was happening in that place again. This is the descriptive potential of imaginative creative processes such as animation or improvised acting and filmmaking (Loizos 1993; Sjöberg 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2017 and Forthcoming), and its capacity to provide an experience and draw more expressive accounts was also present in the process. Mahmoud noticed that while he was painting the scenes he animated he could not respond to my reflections or questions:

I didn’t think much, the questions make us think too much. Instead I didn’t reply many times, many times I had difficulties in answering back to you so I kept on
working, and while working the answer to your question came to my mind. ‘Cause
drawing helps you think all the things you want to do because you can’t give an
answer to everything through words, but you can draw, as we did. 78

Both Mahmoud and Ali reflected upon how different it was for them to remember when they
were closed up in the studio, compared to when they were walking around in the harbours
and reception centres. “But with the drawings other things come to mind,” Mahmoud pointed
out. “It doesn’t have to be something you experienced in that moment. An image comes to
your head: I wanted to be like that!” So for example, the image of his parents crying
(timecode 12:48 mins) or his imagined escape from the reception centre (timecode 30:17
mins) both emerged through drawing.

Ali believed that shooting the documentary had been the most effective way to
convey parts of his story, as it was more emotionally intense to be “there” and feel
everything, remembering in the places of his memory. He said that had he gone alone, the
experience would have been very different. Filming that moment allowed him to search for
the details, to go deeper in certain memories and experience, realising there and then that a
place of his past (a commercial fluvial harbour) reminded him of his aspired future (as a
merchant). But when reflecting on the different processes, he added that the animation also
encouraged him to think of how to enhance certain perceptions that the documentary and his
improvisation had been unable to express. He gave us the example of the street where he
was escaping: “It is in the studio the memory of the police car came to me as I was thinking
‘how can I render the idea of how I felt in that street, so dark…?’” he confessed. “I might
have forgotten the incident, but then thinking of how to explain how dark that street was,
looking at the photograph and drawing upon it, that idea came to me.”

Hence animating, revisiting the places of arrival and improvising in front of the
camera helped my participants express something that was closer to their experiences of
crossing and escaping, but also to the difference within themselves. When we flew back to
the places of arrival to shoot the documentary, remembering past moments helped them
come to terms with changes that had occurred over the years. They told me how the
experience of living in Italy as illegal migrants, with their hopes often shuttered, had made
them lose some qualities which the young man that had just arrived used to have. Amongst
them, courage and the ability to dream were the most prominent. Several times, as we

78 Mahmoud after the animation process, January 2015.
travelled to the places and walked around, Ali and Mahmoud would say how they understood themselves as less brave now and how courage and resoluteness had been characteristic of their youth, when they were able to take their lives into their hands and make enormous decisions. Paradoxically, they noticed that at the time they owned much less in terms of experience, of knowledge of the place and of the language, they had no money and no legal papers, but on the other hand they were stronger and more determined. The awareness spurred by the process of remembering motivated the simultaneous process of recovery, which gave them a sense of reunion. Ali affirmed that while shooting the documentary in the harbour he realised how the research had become something important for him too:

I recovered that courage for the man that I am now. I understood that I needed to face life the same way, and it works somehow better now. I’m more confident and people trust me more as a consequence.

From these kinds of reflections, I also returned to question the common assumptions made about illegal crossing, which is often depicted in sympathetic terms of sacrifice and despair in the media and in the discourse of activists for migrants’ rights, and sadly, as inevitable. These assumptions have been my own too, and I am not denying that these aspects are not part of the event, but I am asking whether depicting the journey solely in these terms might be more representative of the perspective of the empathising European, and not so much the experience of the protagonists. In the construction of their memories and imaginative stories, Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud celebrated risk in the face of adversity, the adventure, their sense of hope and redemption, the fear and the courage.

By exploring my participants’ imaginative lifeworlds through creative practice, this research project has attempted to create a space for self-reflection and autobiographical narrative with the aim of challenging official narratives on migration. In his Mediating mobility: visual anthropology in the age of migration, Köhn argues that films produced by anthropologists and artists have the potential to politically and aesthetically intervene by inviting “their audiences into a position of proximity towards the complexities of the migrant experience” (2016: 15). He argues this can be achieved by applying a variety of aesthetic strategies to destabilise the “spectators’ corporeal, spatial and temporal orientation and in order to make dislocation a shared experience between subject, artist and audience” (ibid).
This was a problematic issue I had to interrogated when faced with the editing of *It was Tomorrow*. Having explored Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud’s discordant experience of time, I was troubled by the idea of making a film and having to constrain material we had created into a linear narrative. I wanted to maintain that sense of dislocation in time and space in the film, as it would be more faithful to how my participants had expressed their perceptions. At the same time I wished to engage the spectators’ imagination in order to create that shareable, human experience that Köhn refers to.

For the process of editing I decided to collaborate with Antonio Augugliaro, a professional editor who had previously worked with me in the editing of *La Vita che non CIE* (2012), a trilogy of short audio-visual mixed media documentaries on the migrant experience of detention centres. Though Antonio works principally as an editor for private television channels, his background in fine arts and video production with Studio Azzurro often emerges when editing more independent and experimental films. I came to his studio with a rough cut of the film, having selected the animation, parts of the animation process work, some physical theatre exercises and parts of my protagonists’ narrations in Milan from when they were obtaining their permits, and from their first places of arrival when retracing their steps. Besides the challenge of disrupting the linearity of the narrative, we had to deal with thematically different levels in the film: we had the journey, the animations, the creative process and the theatre/storytelling interventions. It would have been miraculous to edit all this material into a narrative which conveyed my participants’ and my own views together. During the editing process, Antonio came up with the idea of a “cubist montage”, and he later explained: “I wanted to simulate the process of thought with the cuts”. This reminds me of John Huston’s concept of the edited film coming close to the human experience of thinking. Film is “[m]ore like thought than anything else” (in Murch 1995: 63). Fragmented reality presented by cuts in the edited film, Murch also says, is very similar to the discontinuity we experience when dreaming.

By referring to the avant-garde art movement with “cubist montage”, Antonio wished to push the spectators’ perceptions for them to experience more than they would normally see. He proposed this editing technique in order to highlight multiple perspectives of the same subject, because:

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79 Studio Azzurro is an artistic studio based in Milan, which focuses its research on the expressive potential of new Information Technologies: http://www.studioazzurro.com/index.php
What you see (in the film and in artwork) is not merely what one can look at but what one knows about the object. So, even the edit keeps in consideration what happened in the theatre and animation workshops, and in the places where you travelled to with your characters. Hence the edit tries to reproduce a mental space rather than a succession of temporal events, where one can experience time as going forward or backward, without following another logic than that dictated by the flow of thought, of emotions and of associations.\(^{80}\)

The music used in *It was Tomorrow* also does not follow the tradition of ethnographic film, as it doesn’t belong to the social or lived context of my protagonists.\(^{81}\) The music in the film was not recorded alongside the action of the film, nor did my participants produce it. They were existing tracks composed by a group of ethnomusicologists, called *Dissoi Logoi*\(^{82}\), who experiment with and conduct musical research by weaving together the “contrasting sounds” (from the ancient Greek *dissoi logoi*, ‘contrasting arguments’) of Mediterranean and non-European musical traditions with the more contemporary languages of jazz and rock. The strident sounds of the tracks aim to add to the slightly unsettling atmosphere of the film. In the future we would like to work on the musical soundtrack again as it would be interesting to engage the protagonists in the composition, having them provide examples of songs and music for the musicians to get inspiration from, which might be closer to what they wished to express in the film. This additional process could not take place within the time frame and funding possibilities of my research, but is a possibility I hold for the future in case my protagonists are equally interested in developing it.

The film has been shown to the protagonists and in research seminars amongst scholars in visual anthropology and drama at the University of Manchester. Mohamed, Ali and Mahmoud appeared to be very satisfied with the final product. They felt that we had included the most salient moments of their journeys, and that the animations conveyed the intensity of their imaginative experiences. Mahmoud was amazed by the magic of the rotoscope animations of the theatre scenes, and the protagonists also commented upon the feelings each character conveyed through the film. For instance, Mohamed noticed how his troublesome and reflective character had emerged during the process, and how he felt this

\(^{80}\) during an interview in March 2016  
\(^{81}\) For a guideline regarding observational cinema in ethnographic practice, see Paul Henley 2004.  
\(^{82}\) https://www.dissoilogoi.net/blank-diktv
was then accurately reflected in the final edit of the film. He saw Ali’s character as more positive and hopeful, “it makes me wish for him to achieve what he really wants in life. He has clear ideas in his mind, and he’s not lost nor confused like I am”. On the other hand, Ali praised Mahmoud’s performance and the way his story was conveyed. According to him, Mahmoud’s part in the film is the most touching and effective in expressing the complexity of their experience and the contrasting feelings within it. Both Mahmoud and Ali noticed the drama in each other’s narration during the journeys, for example in the comment: “it looks like Mahmoud is talking on the phone to his brother, for real. He speaks in Arabic and it doesn’t look like he’s acting at all, it’s so natural.”

It was Tomorrow has attempted to challenge the notion of a singular overarching objective truth about people’s migratory experiences. By intertwining the protagonists’ reflections, improvised narrations, movements and animations, it has created an aesthetic space where the different experiences of crossing can be felt and understood through their inherent contradictions and flights of fancy. It witnesses the processes my participants and I engaged with in the hope that the stories and subjectivities we trace may generate a creative space where it is still possible to acknowledge our human ability to imagine alternatives to the current state of the world.

Conclusive notes: where other stories may begin

We cannot live other people’s lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions, they say about their lives. [...] Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else’s inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It’s all a matter of scratching surfaces. (Geertz 1986: 373)

It was Tomorrow and the present thesis are both stories of a collaborative experiment. They have centred their inquiry on migratory experiences by providing themselves opportunities of experience and of creative exploration. There have been times when our work has flowed surprisingly well, while in other instances we stumbled over obstacles that requested us to pause and reflect instead. These moments were of extraordinary importance,

83 Epilogue to The Anthropology of Experience, 1986.
as they required us to look more attentively at what was emerging and at how we wished the
practice to be re-thought and re-directed. Faults and mistakes, when experimenting, are a
necessary part of the creative and learning process. Putting one’s self on “trial” is in fact part
of the etymology of experiment and of experience, through which we come to know the
world and activate our capacity to imagine ourselves differently. By placing the future,
imagination and experience at the centre of its agenda, this practice-based research inserts
itself into the existing realm of engaged anthropology that chooses an interventionist and
imaginative approach to social reality by involving research participants and artists in the
intersubjective processes of ‘knowing’ and ‘making’. The Futures Anthropology Network,
which was created during the 2014 EASA conference in Tallinn, has provided a dynamic
scholarly context through which I have been able to share some of the questions and
discoveries of this current research. I recognise this project in several points in the manifesto
written collaboratively by more than twenty participants in that year’s FAN lab, as it too has
intended to “probe, interrogate and play with futures that are plural, non-linear, cyclical,
implausible and always unravelling”; it has ventured into the complexities of imaginative
lifeworlds, acknowledging differences and uncertainties by embracing “the chaotic,
multisensory, performative and material dimensions of social life” (Salazar, Pink, Irving and
Sjöberg 2017). It is in this sense of bringing together anthropologists’ ethnographic practice
and arts practitioners’ reflective processes that the Anthropology, Media and Performance
degree programme aims to foster innovative and critical research.

Having dealt with imagination and the future, it has been hard not to project this
research into the future. Other possible routes were constantly manifesting themselves as
Ali, Mohamed, Mahmoud and I were creating contexts where other people, in the role of
participant audiences or professional colleagues, were involved and invited us to continue
our practice. This happened during the storytelling nights in particular, which participants
felt were producing a magical space for different and unexpected stories to emerge and be
shared. In these contexts, I have thought about how enriching it would be to further
investigate people’s different imaginary worlds within such hybrid communities, and to
creatively process the existential questions that people interrogate themselves with when
they think of the future. Performance and animation have proven to be inspiring methods,
and I am interested in training further to be able to use additional animation techniques in
the future. More thorough collaborations between participants, creative practitioners and
anthropologists could also be enhanced and encouraged by the creation of contexts that bring
together people to share methods and informant-inspired research questions. Collaborative,
creative and ethnographic practices have the potential of creating relationships, bringing people together to experience each other’s presence, listen to stories and create together communication channels through which to disseminate counter-narratives, dreams, questions about our common humanity.

Moreover, as migration needs to be looked through a double prism (Sayad 1999), I am compelled to think that an equivalent inquiry needs to take place in the locations people migrate from. Mohamed and Mahmoud often tell me about their brothers asking for help to join them in Italy. Mohamed’s teenage brother Ahmed is now attending an Italian high school recently established in Faiyum, the largest town near Tatoun. This is a material sign of the area’s continued connection with Italy. It would be interesting to apply performative and animation processes in Faiyum’s school to envisage what inhabits young people’s horizons now, and collaborate with other Egyptian creative practitioners. However, since the economic recession, Italy and Europe are no longer described in the same way as when Ali, Mohamed and Mahmoud decided to cross. Samuli Schielke’s new work looks at the aspirations and experiences of Egyptian migrants from rural villages to the urban suburbs of the Gulf, which is where more and more Egyptians emigrate to, preferring Arab countries to a declining European economy. Bostami still challenges Ali to abandon his loneliness and financial instability in Italy, and for them to join forces in Saudi Arabia. But Ali keeps wondering which life to choose.
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