Pontifícia Universidade Católica
do Rio de Janeiro

Suzana de Souza Lima Velasco

Unbecoming Refugees:
Shuffled Stories and The Politics of Imagination

Tese de doutorado

Thesis presented to the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Relações Internacionais of PUC-Rio in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doutora em Relações Internacionais.

Advisor: Prof. Robert Brian James Walker
Co-advisor: Prof. Roberto Vilchez Yamato

Rio de Janeiro
May 2023

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Bibliographic data

Velasco, Suzana de Souza Lima

Unbecoming refugees : shuffled stories and the politics of imagination / Suzana de Souza Lima Velasco ; advisor: Robert Brian James Walker ; co-advisor: Roberto Vilchez Yamato. – 2023.
247 f. : il. color. ; 30 cm

Tese (doutorado)–Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Relações Internacionais, 2023.
Inclui bibliografia

1. Relações Internacionais – Teses. 2. Refugiados. 3. Migração. 4. Linguagem. 5. Categorias políticas. 6. Imaginação. I. Walker, Robert Brian James. II. Yamato, Roberto Vilchez. III. Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Instituto de Relações Internacionais. IV. Título.

CDD: 327

To Emiliano
and our eventful everyday

Acknowledgments

I mostly want to thank migrants whom I met over the years, first as a journalist, but whose nurtured relationships showed me the complexity of migration's entanglements in life and made me think about the implications of collecting and reproducing their stories. Most of them I met when I lived in Berlin. They are not part of the dissertation as a research subject, but the encounters with them have deeply impacted this work.

Napuli Paul Langa, one of the leaders of the O-Platz movement, the Sudanese *asylum seeker* who spent five days on a tree at Oranienplatz to protest against eviction in 2014. Sevim Çelebi-Gottschlich and Ahmet Tuncer, who arrived in Germany as Turkish *guest workers* in the 1960s and became political activists: she was the first Turkish woman in Berlin's Parliament and he struggles for social housing. Ayham Majid Agha, Syrian actor and director who used to do productions inspired by Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed in Damascus, where he left with a work visa after being persecuted and tortured: he didn't want the status of *refugee* to be able to visit Syria again, what he has actually done. Maryam Abu Khaled, a Palestinian actress who grew up in Jenin camp, in the West Bank, and used to say she could not stand talking about being a black woman from Palestine in Germany anymore. I was inspired by Ayham and Maryam's work in the multilingual Maxim Gorki Theater, my favorite place in my favorite city.

Back in Brazil, my project was to be again surrounded by people during my Ph.D., but the pandemic forced me to change plans when I was preparing to do ethnographic work. Despite the stimulating encounters with creative texts and films, the research was lonely. I thank the days I could dance, be by the sea and be with my closest friends. That has always made me think better.

During my Ph.D. years, I mostly thank Rob Walker, whom I affectively think of as my Lacanian advisor: he would attentively listen, provoke me with unanswerable questions and then let me go so I could find my own way. I thank him for having trusted not only that I had a research problem but also that it would make me "angry" enough to write a dissertation. I am happy to hear my voice in what I have written, despite the difficulties of a foreign language. I also thank Roberto Yamato, my co-advisor, for his brightness and drive to expand thinking and debate together. We have always had a rewarding encounter.

In my academic journey, I thank Carolina Moulin, my Master's advisor at Instituto de Relações Internacionais (IRI) and my initial Ph.D. advisor back in 2018, when she was still a professor at PUC-Rio. Besides being an intellectual inspiration, Carolina has opened my way to the research on migration with unmeasurable support and has always been sensitive to my ways of thinking. I thank her for being a member of the examination committee, together with other professors whom I admire: James Clausen and Paulo Chamon, who have always brought passion to political thought, and Samson Opondo, whom I had the pleasure to meet in person after having read his texts and whose conversation in July 2022, during the IPS Winter School, gave me insights for a dissertation that was still chaotic by then.

This interdisciplinary dissertation would not have been possible without the intellectual and affective exchange with other areas of thought. At PUC-Rio, Cátedra Sergio Vieira de Mello has been expanding and problematizing the research about refugees. I especially thank Professor Rosana Kohl Bines at Departamento de Letras, who has been a source of inspiration since the first time I attended her class and has illuminated this work's connections between aesthetics and politics. I am also indebted to Núcleo de Dramaturgia Firjan Sesi, whose encounters coordinated by Diogo Liberano in 2019 led me to write a play that, together with this dissertation, speculates about the limits and possibilities of representing refugees.

I thank my colleagues at IRI, who have always supported each other: Maria Alice, Ricardo, Fátima, Thais, Lais, Daniel, and especially Bruna, my brilliant friend with whom I spent six months in London during our Ph.D. period abroad, in-between Malaysian street food, second-hand shops and omicron. I thank Goldsmiths, University of London for having me as a visiting student, especially Martina Tazziolli, from the Politics and International Relations Department, and Alice Elliot, who took me closer to Anthropology, despite the impossibility of doing ethnographic work. The time in the UK was financed by the CAPES PRINT program – Cátedra Sergio Vieira de Mello. The whole study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

Finally and importantly, I thank my parents, Marta and Sylla, and my sister, Mariana, for being the ones I can always count on no matter what. Emiliano, my happy love, body and words by my side, supporting me, encouraging me, and making me smile and laugh every day. And Miguel, my dear 9-year-old stepson – or my *lori*, the name we invented for his place in our relationship. Seeing the long hours I used to spend over texts in English, Miguel gave me a hand-written Portuguese-English dictionary as a Christmas gift, with words he chose and their correct pronunciation. This dissertation is then full of words like bee, drizzle, dice and jackfruit, even though they are not to be found in the text.

Abstract

Velasco, Suzana de Souza Lima; Walker, Robert Brian James (Advisor); Yamato, Roberto Vilchez (Co-advisor). **Unbecoming Refugees: Shuffled Stories and the Politics of Imagination**. Rio de Janeiro, 2023. 247p. Tese de doutorado. Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This dissertation examines how stories about refugees can dissent from the predictable narrative of persecution and suffering expected of them without disregarding the violence involved in their displacement. The *refugee* has become a discursive category framing an abstracted and depoliticized figure of protection, one that in the last decade has been used in opposition to the *migrant* understood as a burden. As with all lives, the experiences of refugees exceed the categories imposed on them. Their specificity is that their excess threatens a disturbance of the international order. They are framed as a temporary even if inevitable exception until normalcy – citizenship – is restored. The analysis connects the making of refugeeness to a stable language that guarantees predictability in a system of states in which movement must be controlled. It then shows that even the most categorical language depends on ambivalence that can destabilize rigid meanings, although those are captured again. Suggesting that language is key to questioning the spatial regulative ideal of political belonging, the dissertation examines fictional and non-fictional prose, feature films and documentaries that, in the last ten years and in different countries, have created more unstable representations of refugees, rearranging their spatial and cognitive places. Through a close look at the narratives, their plots, characters and formal choices, the dissertation shows how unbecoming refugees live in ways other than the expected role of passive victims, unmaking refugeeness. Building on debates about visibility/invisibility, boundaries and agency fostered by the stories, the analysis begins with a discussion on the difficulty of abandoning categories that are still needed to justify protection and proceeds to the possibility of reframing refugees' narratives by bringing imagination to life, a politicizing practice that is constitutively absent from the *figure* of the refugee.

Keywords

Refugees; migration; stories; language; political categories; imagination

Resumo

Velasco, Suzana de Souza Lima; Walker, Robert Brian James (Orientador); Yamato, Roberto Vilchez (Coorientador). **Refugiados Fora de Lugar: Histórias Embaralhadas e a Política da Imaginação**. Rio de Janeiro, 2023. 247p. Tese de doutorado. Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Esta dissertação analisa como histórias sobre refugiados podem divergir da narrativa previsível de perseguição e sofrimento que é esperada deles, sem desconsiderar a violência envolvida em seu deslocamento. *Refugiado* se tornou uma categoria discursiva que delineia uma figura de proteção abstrata e despolitizada, e que na última década tem sido usada em oposição ao *migrante* entendido como um fardo. Como todas as experiências, as dos refugiados excedem as categorias impostas a eles. Sua especificidade é que seu excesso ameaça a ordem internacional. Eles são enquadrados como uma exceção temporária, ainda que inevitável, até que a normalidade – a cidadania – seja restaurada. A análise relaciona a construção da categoria de refugiado com uma linguagem estável que garanta previsibilidade num sistema de estados em que a mobilidade precisa ser controlada. Em seguida, mostra que até a linguagem mais categórica depende de uma ambivalência, por meio da qual os sentidos podem ser desestabilizados, ainda que sejam capturados novamente. Sugerindo que a linguagem é chave para se questionar o ideal regulativo espacial do pertencimento político, a dissertação analisa textos e filmes de ficção e não ficção que, nos últimos dez anos e em diferentes países, criaram formas mais instáveis de representação de refugiados, deslocando e rearrumando seus lugares espaciais e cognitivos. Com atenção a narrativas, seus enredos, personagens e escolhas formais, a dissertação mostra como pessoas denominadas refugiadas vivem nas fronteiras dessa categoria, para além da vitimização. Por meio de debates sobre visibilidade/invisibilidade, fronteiras e agência provocados pelas histórias, a análise começa com uma discussão sobre a dificuldade de se abandonar uma categoria ainda necessária para justificar proteção e chega à possibilidade de ressignificar narrativas sobre refugiados levando imaginação à vida, uma politização que está constitutivamente ausente da *figura* do refugiado.

Palavras-chave

Refugiados; migração; histórias; linguagem; categorias políticas; imaginação

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Se fosse possível, por exemplo, estudar as árvores numa língua feita de árvores, a terra numa língua feita de terra, se o peso do mármore fosse calculado em números de mármore, se descrevêssemos uma paisagem com uma quantidade exata de materiais e de elementos que a compõem, então estenderíamos a mão até o próximo corpo e saberíamos pelo tato seu nome e seu sentido, e seríamos deuses corpóreos, e a natureza seria nossa como uma gramática viva, um dicionário de musgo e de limo, um rio cuja foz fosse seu nome próprio. Mas é com nosso sopro que nos dirigimos a tudo, com a voz que o frágil fole da garganta emite, com o hálito que carrega nossas enzimas, é com o pequeno vento de nossa língua que chamamos o vento verdadeiro. Mais do que comer, correr ou flechar a carne alheia, mais do que aquecer a prole sob a palha, nós nos sentamos e damos nomes, como pequenos imperadores do todo e de tudo. Uma mulher dirigiu seus passos ao poente e sumiu; sabem o que fez aquele que ela abandonou, enquanto fitava o poente com os olhos cavos? Ele grunhiu, e este grunhido virou o nome da desaparecida. Ele lhe deu um nome, ele *ganhou* seu nome, como um coágulo, uma retenção daquilo que passava, confuso, por ele, um poente paralelo ao poente diante dele.

(Nuno Ramos, *Ó*)

1
A seesaw crosses a border wall: an introduction

The state border between Mexico and the United States has different physical incarnations in over three thousand kilometers: wall, fence, river, or just a sign showing one is in the territorial limit of the two countries. Many times, though, there is only desert, without any visible interruption. In July 2019, architects and university lecturers Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello installed three seesaws in a section of the physical border shaped by a sequence of vertical steel slats, between Ciudad Juárez, in Mexico, and Sunland Park, New Mexico, in the U.S. There are thin openings between the slats, and people can see through them, even if not able to cross to the other side. With the help of the artistic group Coletivo Chopeke, they put the three pink beams between the slats. Each edge remained on one side of the wall with a seat where children could play for around half an hour. Without official permission, the action was planned to happen fast, before guards could dismantle it. The border patrol arrived but did nothing to stop people from interacting; they just observed.[1]

Designed by Rael and San Fratello in 2009, the *Teeter-Totter Wall* was the first executed project among others conceived especially for that border and gathered in Rael's book *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (2017). Extensively filmed and photographed, it went viral on social media and won prestigious design awards. Media coverage was generally positive, but there was also some critique of sentimentality. Over a year after the

[1] Videos and pictures of the project and the action can be seen on the website of the architectural office Rael San Fratello: https://www.rael-sanfratello.com/. Last access: March 31, 2023.

action, the reporter and art critic Max Pearl (2021) accused it of "tragedy porn masquerading as protest art," a type of work "irresistible to liberal centrist do-gooders." He argued that it was cynical in evoking joy and fun when the problem was serious and irresolvable, and used children who are unaware of the violence of the wall: "If we could effect substantial change, why would we content ourselves with something so purely symbolic as this?," asked Pearl, rhetorically.[2] The project may seem naïve if one just focuses on the declared intentions of the architects at the time – "a message of joy and hope for the future," said San Fratello[3] – or on their description of the project, through which people on either side of the border "could directly experience the interdependency between the two countries by enacting the mutual give-and-take required of two nations whose economic success literally hinges upon their relationship with each other" (Rael, 2017, p. 105). But I want to bracket the architects' statements and the public reactions and stay with the project and its execution with the children for a little while.

The three beams/seesaws were installed in an area in Sunland Park where people are already used to gathering on both sides of the border. Families separated by it have been meeting for years in that specific location and other areas where the wall has open spaces. The *Teeter-Totter Wall* highlights practices of being together through the wall usually outside of public view, like meeting and chatting through the slats' holes. Children who play there may be more aware of the violence of the wall than Pearl imagines; some might even have experienced crossing the wall themselves to arrive at the other side. The area where people played on the seesaws is the same area where, months earlier, migrants were detained by a right-wing militia[4]; the same area where a private section of the wall was built with residents' donations[5]. One of Pearl's criticisms was that architects opted for a "fun wall" instead of imagining a world without walls. I argue, on the contrary, that the strength of the project is exactly in not tearing the wall down. The wall is there and has no sign of disappearing any time soon. While there may be a desire for no walls

[2] https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/columns/teeter-totter-wall-1234581905/. Last access: March 31, 2023.
[3] https://www.dezeen.com/2021/01/19/design-of-the-year-2020-rael-san-fratello-border-seesaw/. Last access: March 31, 2023.
[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/us/new-mexico-militia-border.html. Last access: March 31, 2023.
[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/28/us/border-wall-private-new-mexico.html. Last access: March 31, 2023.

at all, a project that erases their existence could also be a cynical one.[6] The *Teeter-Totter Wall* does not ignore the violence of the steel slats, but displaces the view frame to focus on some life that happens through their cracks. The effect is the apparent paradox of a border wall that cannot totally separate people.

The supposed absurdity of a connection through a wall is exposed when people play on the seesaws, which only work as such if there is one person on each side and both keep moving. If not, they are just thin beams. Other projects thought by the architects for the Mexico-U.S. physical border have similar effects. In *Swing Wall*, "people could board the double-sided swing from either side and swing such that their bodies would physically cross to the other side, with no exit, before returning back to their country of origin," describes Rael (2017, p. 69). He draws a parallel to Río Bravo/Rio Grande, the same river with different names in Mexico and the U.S., which "perpetually shifts back and forth across the wall, even as it defines the border." The project also evokes the flux of the sea underneath and beyond the wall on the beach in California, where there is another absurd image: a wall that goes into the ocean. In *Wall y Ball*, the wall serves as a volleyball net, with a referee on the top. The project was inspired by the tradition of playing volleyball over the wall since the first *Fiesta Binacional*, in 1979, celebrated by citizens of Naco, Arizona, and Naco, Sonora. They are "sister cities," each on one side of the states' territorial border (Ibid., p. 73-75). It is one more instance of a celebration that ordinarily happens at the also violent border, and despite it.[7]

The artificiality of the projects, their somehow apparently nonsensical character, highlights the artificiality of the wall itself, which is many times normalized in the news about migrants' arrests and deaths but also in the daily lives of people who live on both sides. Stories at the border can include joy and

[6] For instance, the short documentary *A Three Minute Hug* (2019) has such a cynical effect. Directed by Everardo González, it shows families reunited at an embankment along Río Bravo, at the border of El Paso, in Texas, U.S., and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Some of them hadn't seen each other for over ten years, separated due to deportation or rejected asylum applications. On May 12, 2018, 300 hundred families were allowed to meet for three minutes until hearing the shout: "Time's up!" Organized by the Border Network for Human Rights, a human rights advocacy and immigration reform organization, the action was called Hugs Not Walls, even though for those families the wall was still there, and maybe even more present, during the three-minute encounter.

[7] Vila (2000) analyzes the intensive use of the term "sister cities" in Ciudad Juárez to indicate cultural proximity with El Paso, Texas, which is very close to Sunland Park, New Mexico. He argues that the term is a metaphor for connection, which "buttresses the construction of a Fronterizo identity on the Mexican side of the border" (Ibid., p. 233). That does not mean that the relationship between "sister cities" is deprived of conflicts.

desperation at the same time. By playing with this simultaneity, the architectural projects recognize that borders both unite and discriminate. They activate other worlds at the border, even though there is a physical and visible wall in place. Instead of erasing it, the projects change their materiality and meaning, even if just in a small place for a short time, and unveil an extended border zone. They also evidence encounters that happen in daily lives, and not in the risky moments of border crossings. As the architect San Fratello said when the *Teeter-Totter Wall* was executed, "play can be an act of resistance."[8] When there are no pink beams anymore, residents of Mexican and U.S. border cities continue to invent worlds in their regular meetings or *fiestas* at the border, through the gaps between the slats.

The exceptionality of playing on the seesaw through a wall, then, relates to an extended temporality of everyday practices at the border. More than an isolated mediatic event, it indicates an "eventful everyday" (Das, 2007), it reframes the border as a zone of permanent connections at the same time that it does not erase the oppression of the separations imposed by the wall. This is fundamental for the whole dissertation: the simultaneity of violence and joy at the border. It also points to the fact that migrants must resort to the bounded international order and negotiate with its territorial and also non-territorial borders. In the playful action, the wall does not disappear. Its shape is reframed by an intervention emphasizing a crack in its form, but it remains there. One can pay more attention to the wall that divides people or to the connections through it (highlighted by the seesaws). It depends on who sees them and the conditions for being seen.

During the past few years, I have been carrying the image of the pink seesaw crossing the border wall with me, an improvised and cheap seesaw, though jazzy because of its color. I took it to the play I published in 2021, *Pra Onde Quer Que Eu Vá Será Exílio* (something like *Wherever I Go It Will Be Exile*), whose writing was fundamental for the making of this dissertation. In the play, the seesaw is not at the Mexico-U.S. border but divides the rich and the poor areas of an unnamed city.[9] It is there, playing on the seesaw, where Rosa, a 12-year-old child from the

[8] https://www.dezeen.com/2021/01/19/design-of-the-year-2020-rael-san-fratello-border-seesaw/. Last access: March 31, 2023.

[9] The idea came from a three-meter-high wall that extends through ten kilometers separating the poor area of Pamplona Alta and rich mansions up the hill in Lima, Peru. I thank Renata Summa for showing a documentary about that wall in her undergraduate course on borders at IRI, PUC-Rio, which I attended during my teaching internship.

poor neighborhood, meets Ana, a young adult who has recently arrived after escaping from a war in another unnamed country and temporarily lives on the other side. Unlike the original seesaw, this one crosses a wall made of concrete, so that Rosa and Ana can only speak through a small hole around the metal piece. They also exchange pictures through the hole, and, importantly, in the impossibility of touching or seeing each other closely, they imagine what the other might be like – an imagination they carry with them when moving elsewhere. As I say in the postface of the play, the seesaw was one of my *imagens-síntese*, an image that synthetizes "the desire for life through the cracks, not to forget about the oppression, the violence of those who feel impelled to migrate, but mainly as a fable about how people keep finding gaps through which to desire" (Velasco, 2021, p. 76, my translation).

I carry the image of the seesaw through the border wall throughout this dissertation, even though not so literally anymore.

1.1
Overview of the problem

This dissertation is concerned with the making and unmaking of refugeeness.[10] The *refugee* has become a discursive category framing an abstract depoliticized figure of protection, one that in the last decade has been used in opposition to the *migrant* understood as a burden. This work is also concerned with the violence of naming and the inescapability of naming. Even the most categorical language has an ambivalence, through which stable meanings can be challenged, destabilized and replaced, even if to be captured again in new categories. Since all experiences exceed the categories that name them, what specificity do *refugees* bring to the debate on the violence and ambivalence of political categories, to "the dispute concerning the relations of words to things that make up the heart of politics" (Rancière, 2004, p. 40)? And how do people named *refugees* live within this category in ways other than as passive speechless victims implied by it (Malkki, 1996; Rajaram, 2002), opening ways of thinking about political belonging not

[10] Following Nguyen (2019, p. 111), I consider refugeeness "the psychic quality or condition of embodiment that results from seeking refuge and/or coming into contact with the bureaucratic processes laid out by legal instruments such as the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and other (inter)national refugee policies."

determined by spatial imaginations? While I aim to answer the first question in the next chapter, which frames the problem from which this dissertation departs, the second question will guide the rest of the thesis. The subsequent chapters address the problem through the analysis of fictional and non-fictional texts and films that, in different ways, challenge the "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017), the predictable narrative of persecution and suffering expected of refugees, without disregarding the violence involved in their displacement.

With the consolidation of the right to national self-determination in Europe at the beginning/mid-20th Century, the loss of national rights implied the loss of human rights, whose recovery was therefore dependent on "the restoration or the establishment of national rights" (Arendt, 1973 [1951], p. 299). In an international order where everyone has a proper place as a citizen, only the failure of a state's protection can justify movement to another state. In this context, citizenship was solidified as the precondition to humanity, and refugees became an anomaly, a temporary speechless figure that required a definitive (national) solution. Connected to the idea of an inevitability of displacement, as opposed to "voluntary" migrants, refugees have been a legal way for states to deal with migration's excess in the 20th Century. They have become a temporary even if inevitable exception to be recaptured by the logic of the modern international as a non-excessive category, a category in suspension until normalcy – citizenship – is restored.

Recognizing the importance of this context defined by two world wars, decolonization and the fight for national self-determination, this dissertation relates it to an older historical context. It goes back to the rise of nation-states in the 17th Century, which shapes an intrinsic relationship between *nomos* and space, or identity and territory, citizen and state. The older relationship between a stable language of categorizations and the spatial imaginary of modern politics, which anchors claims to humanity to claims to citizenship and turns migrants into a deviance, sets the problem driving this dissertation, framed in **chapter 2**. I argue that language is key to questioning the regulative ideal of political belonging, whose roots in early modernity are connected to the making of refugeeness in the 20th Century. Even the most rigid category carries an ambivalence; the taming of language can never totally erase its traces, the excess in actually lived lives. Therefore, I suggest that looking at more unstable forms of representation of refugees is a way to challenge the "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017), the predictable

narrative expected of them, which guides eligibility procedures and refugees' access to legal rights.

Nevertheless, as it will become clearer during the dissertation, the "asylum story" cannot be so easily dismissed. Despite contemporary spatiotemporal challenges to the system of states, a rules-based international order disrupted by refugees resists. The solution is not simply denying or reaffirming it, since the language to support refugees' protection is still inevitably attached to that ordering of political life. As Lowe (2015, p. 41) frames it,

> we do not escape the inhabiting of our present, and the irony that many of the struggles we would wish to engage are not only carried out in the languages of liberty, equality, reason, progress, and human rights – almost without exception, they must be translated into the political and juridical spaces of this tradition. We must reckon that present contests over the life and death of the "human" are often only legible in terms of those spaces still authorized by liberal political humanism.

1.2
Literary and cinematic choices

After chapter 2, which frames the dissertation's problem, the following chapters gather fictional and non-fictional texts and films to think about the limits but also the possibilities that the name *refugee* carries, trying to look at the wall and the seesaw at the same time, and analyzing the conditions for each to be seen. In this sense, when addressing the category of the refugee, instead of refusing or erasing it, the works analyzed here play with its ambivalences, showing its limitations and deviations but also the sometimes-inevitable resort to it by the own subjects named as such. This is a crucial aspect that led to the choice of the texts and films: a critique of the category combined with the recognition that it may still be necessary in a rights-based international order. In a world where that specific political ordering remains despite increasing spatiotemporal transformations, legal categories related to citizenship are both necessary and inadequate, violent and inevitable. The chosen works sometimes reproduce common views of who refugees are, not least because their survival depends many times on being in a categorical place; at other times, they frame the world in ways that dissent from that ordering (Rancière, 2004, 2007, 2008). But none offers transcendent solutions to the grammar of the international system of states. They point to new possibilities for imagining who refugees are while navigating that grammar.

The texts and films deal with this duality in both their content and their form. They simultaneously support the rights of refugees and highlight the violence of the categorical definition, and while their form is not radically innovative or *avant-gardist*, but pretty much follows conventional narrative standards, they dislocate refugees' proper places. Woolley (2020) identifies some anxiety in contemporary narratives that address refugees, since it is difficult to avoid reproducing stories of persecution and suffering, given the actual violence involved in migratory displacements and the responses to it. The analyzed works stretch imaginations and redistribute the sensible (Ibid., 2004), but the perceptual shift they foster may be very small and temporary, just like the seesaw. In a dissertation concerned with ways of challenging the category of the refugee, I think of change not necessarily as a big transformative event, like tearing down the wall, but also as small creative interventions in the daily lives of people who live within categories/borders, which are both artificial and have significant material consequences in their lives.

Therefore, the chosen literary and cinematic works bring the violence of displacements to the fore at the same time that they, in very different ways, present unbecoming refugees: people who are improper, out of their expected place, and in their inappropriateness, unmake refugeeness. As I hope it will become clearer throughout the dissertation, the idea of unmaking refugeeness is not escaping from the modern international order, but highlighting the tension between language's transparency and opacity, between the violence and the necessity of categories to guarantee refugees' survival. As chapter 2 analyzes, modernity's separation of subject and world is fundamental for the establishment of cognitive and spatial borders. If that separation cannot be transcended, it can nevertheless be destabilized. As I argue at the end of that chapter, which connects the problem with the rest of the dissertation, this destabilization is a politicizing move. It reframes the world through small rearrangements of the perceptual field, shifting refugees' categorical places, but it does not deny that they many times still need and want to be named refugees. Their experiences always exceed that naming, though.

Rancière (2004, 2007, 2008, 2009) is a central thinker guiding the dissertation, and the way he thinks about these perceptible rearrangements, which are decisive for a politics of knowledge, will become clearer at the end of chapter 2 and throughout the thesis. For now, it is important to stress that the chosen literary and cinematic works have multiple ways of establishing "aesthetic separations"

(Ibid., 2008), or different narrative arrangements that move refugees out of the roles implied by the "asylum story." They destabilize common expectations of what a story about a refugee should be, even if not radically challenging established narrative forms. In different degrees, they all combine legibility and estrangement. As Rancière (2004, p. 63, my emphasis) states,

> [s]uitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of *a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning*.

I chose works produced in the last ten years in different locations of the world, which directly speak to themes in the public debate regarding refugees: the detention of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border; African would-be asylum seekers who deal for months with bureaucratic procedures in Germany; the involvement of refugees and non-refugees in housing struggles in São Paulo, Brazil; the arrival of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Europe and the attempt to choose where to apply for asylum. Nevertheless, the dissertation is not about these themes, but about how they are articulated in writing and images in ways that point to a more complex relationship between subjects named refugees and the legal and political order that names them as such. In different ways, the works deal with the ambivalence of the category, showing how lives that exceed it reimagine who a refugee can be and, in this movement, problematize the category from within.

Although the chapters could be read independently, their order in this dissertation follows a specific narrative arc that departs from the difficulty of abandoning categories still needed to justify protection in the international order and gradually proceeds to the possibility of reframing refugees' narratives by bringing imagination to life, a politicizing practice constitutively absent from the *figure* of the refugee. In this arc that goes from the attachment to the legal category to possibilities of reimagining it, chapters 3 and 4 deal with the challenges of narrating stories of refugees in ways that divert from states' parameters. They show how hesitation and stuttering can embrace the complexities involved in refugees' displacements, confronting a coherent "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017). Chapters 5

and 6 analyze stories in which imagination disturb who refugees should be, politicizing their agency.

The analysis of texts and films begins in **chapter 3** with two works of writer Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017) and the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019), which highlight the tension between law and the stuttered or shuffled stories of unaccompanied children who arrive at the border of Mexico and the United States. In the essay, self-aware of "a story's ability to restrict" (Mengestu, 2017), the narrator avoids saying much about the children she meets as a translator in an immigration court. But she ends up looking closer to a testimony that fits the "asylum story" to defend the protection of children, which she names *refugees*, opposing them to *immigrants*, *illegals* or *undocumented minors*. In this sense, she adjusts to the coherent narrative with proof of persecution to defend children's rights, which has the consequence of excluding migrants who don't fit the category. In the novel, when children's stories are fictionalized, they in many ways repeat the "horror stories" from the media and institutional reports; nevertheless, there is a breach of imagination in an encounter of different children, who play with each other and invent new names.

Lost Children Archive also fosters a debate that will accompany the whole dissertation: the binary visibility/invisibility as a framework to think about migrants' agency. In the novel, trying to distance herself from restrictive definitions, the auto-fictional narrator calls refugees *lost children*. While this move towards anonymity has been one of the main paths of critical migration studies to challenge representation, I argue that the focus on imperceptibility risks generalizing migration and divorcing bodies from language (Sharma, 2009). The discussion about visibility and invisibility is resumed in **chapter 4**, which focuses on *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015)/ *Go, Went, Gone* (2017), by Jenny Erpenbeck, a novel that, like Luiselli's work, is self-reflexive of the vulnerable lives it frames but adept at nurturing the plot with its philosophical mood. The narrative begins with African refugees who protest in a square and a German professor who does not see them, problematizing how and for whom one becomes visible or escapes from sight or the conditions for a refugee to be seen. The chapter relates the discussion on the limits of seeing/knowing to the speculation about how names/language, as boundaries (with-in) themselves, work not only as forms of discrimination but also as connecting storylines. The relationship between the

German citizen and the African refugees is changed when the professor realizes the insufficiency of his catalog of questions, starts relating to them and is questioned back, having the order of his world shaken. The chapter also explores the mismatch between the letter of the law and the actual lives of refugees, who keep telling stories in some way or another, in stuttering, hesitance, repetition, confusion, overload of information, or just through silences, but rarely simply answering direct questions.

The following two chapters point to ways of reframing who refugees might be. Again, the analyzed works do that while recognizing that the legal category is many times what guarantees refugees' survival, even with all the other exclusions it implies. **Chapter 5** explores how the conditions of precarity and displacement are shared by refugees and Brazilians who struggle in housing movements in São Paulo, in two works of fiction that speak to an actual occupation in the city: the novel *Ocupação* (2019)/*Occupation* (2021), by Julián Fuks, and the film *Era o Hotel Cambridge* (*The Cambridge Squatter*, 2017), by Eliane Caffé. The shared condition makes some Brazilian residents in both narratives consider themselves "refugees in their own country." While the commonality between Brazilians and foreigners is important to challenge strictly legal/national migration categories, the narratives also go beyond this commonality in two ways. First, they consider how legally being a refugee has concrete consequences on the possibilities of acting politically. I take advantage of this context to discuss the other side of the binary recognition/anonymity, the one of visibility, which has gained force in critical migration studies through the concept of "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2002, 2008). I argue that an *act* is not always a possible path for non-citizens who live in fear or oppression, having an unstable relationship with time and visibility. The status of citizenship still matters. Second, both narratives explore the relationship between a collective formation and singularities, showing that the building of a "we" is based on a common cause or identity but also sustained by "uncommon estrangements" (Ahmed, 1999). The everyday is not only related to hardships of the housing struggle. In the movie, an affective community is epitomized by the joint creation of an audiovisual blog, whose scenes' textures, lightning and colors are different from the rest of the film.

The bringing of imagination into reality through audiovisual registers closes chapter 5 and opens the way to **chapter 6**, which reimagines the "asylum story"

together with the documentary *On the Bride's Side* (*Io Sto con la Sposa*, 2014), by Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, Gabriele del Grande and Antonio Augugliaro. Inventing a wedding party to masquerade the crossing of five undocumented Syrians and Syria's Palestinians through the internal borders of Europe, the film manages to recognize asylum seekers' rights and make us see them differently at the same time. As bride, groom and guests, they are unbecoming refugees on a four-day trip by car from Italy to Sweden. They frustrate expectations of truth and authenticity and show how the instantiation of borders produces illegality and speechless subjects, and not the other way around. That is only achieved with the participation of a transnational network of activists who not only help them with material means and information but take responsibility for the journey. Being *with* is fundamental in the whole movie and highlighted by the camera, especially when asylum seekers share their stories of surviving shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea. While not refusing the representation of the tragedies since any testimony is also a representation (Rancière, 2008), the film complexifies the picture of victimhood that the isolated testimonies could privilege, connecting them to a chain of images/speeches of joy, support and plans for the future, while being attentively listened by the others who are *with* them.

The role of imagination in disturbing familiar categories and politicizing refugees' lives is reinforced in **chapter 7**, which brings a couple of examples of visual artworks after briefly recalling the move of the dissertation: first, relating the figure of the refugee in the modern international order to a politics of knowledge according to which names are bounded stable entities; and second, destabilizing this relation through narratives that suggest an entanglement between man and word, taking refugees out of unambiguous places.

1.3
A brief note on method

I had multiple encounters with the analyzed texts and films, at different moments, even before the research officially began. I have spent time with them, and in each encounter, they would speak back to me, bringing me new perceptions and questions. In this sense, echoing Shapiro (2013, p. 31) in the introduction of *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*, the value of the aesthetic works here "inheres in the way my encounters with them summon critical thinking." In these

encounters, I have paid close attention to the ways narratives are structured, their plots, settings and their "aesthetic subjects," or "those who through artistic genres, articulate and mobilize thinking" (Ibid., p. 11).

Spending time with the texts and films was also a way to do some justice to the time these narratives spend with their characters. Opondo and Shapiro (2022) mention the idea of the "interval" used by Frank Kermode in his theory of fiction, which is the attention to the temporal rhythms of human life between beginning and end. By privileging the interval, some narratives "disclose affected lives whose fates evoke reflection in contrast with sensationalist news designed for short attention spans" (Ibid., p. 8).[11] Throughout his book *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode (2000 [1967]) refers to the image of the tick-tock of a clock. It is used as "a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize" (Ibid., p. 45). While I do not strictly examine works of fiction, and this dissertation is not one, my writing takes inspiration from the idea of the interval, attuning to the ways in which narratives make the duration between beginning and end be perceived.

In a sort of ethnography of literary and cinematic works, as I like to think of my encounters with them, I carried the seesaw as an inspiration to bring imagination to the analysis of stories. By treating the fictional and non-fictional texts and films as my archives, I aim to do what Kazanjian (2015, 2016) calls "speculative work" or "that which might not be the expression of a subject's will, desire, intention, or voice but might still be readable by us, today, as a powerfully political text" (Ibid., 2015, p. 182). He asks: "Might we learn from our archives how to unfix our presumptions about political agency and attend to scenes of textual speculation?" Researching historical subjects in archives of slavery, Kazanjian (2016, p. 135) proposes a "critical interruption between the empirical and the unverifiable," in which information and speculation can supplement each other instead of being conflated. That means being able to read texts "not only for the empirical information they offer, but also for the theoretical work they do – for the ways they speculate upon ontological, epistemological, and political questions" (Ibid., p. 140).

[11] Draft text of the Introduction to the forthcoming book *Passages: On Aesthetics of Precarity* (Opondo; Shapiro; Benish), presented by Opondo and Shapiro at the International Political Sociology Winter School at PUC-Rio in July 2022.

Even though my archives are not historical, I aim to use them as a resource to speculate about the meanings of being a refugee nowadays and, hopefully, problematize the category. I run the risk of "overreading" them, as Kazanjian (2016, p. 143) says, reframing the usual critique of the term:

> What if we refused to allow the threatening charge of 'overreading' to circumscribe texts that are supposed to narrate an autobiography or to describe a life? What if we refused to let cautions against 'overreading' disallow such texts from historical speculation? What if we repurposed the term overreading and used it – in a manner Derrida would call paleonomy – as a name for the activity of reading for the singular and unverifiable in the putatively empirical?

For this reason, I chose to follow the stories very closely and write about them describing scenes and dialogues, not only summarizing them: to foster an interruption of the information they bring with speculations about political questions regarding the making and unmaking of refugeeness, such as representation, storytelling, boundaries, and agency. The ways these stories, their plots and characters "map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains" (Shapiro, 2013, p. xiv) are more important than the biographical accounts of the lives they tell. Following this idea, this dissertation is not a restorative project of vulnerable lives. The work's "aesthetic subjects," portrayed by non-refugees writers and filmmakers and not as self-representations,[12] are characters whose "movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than what they tell us about the world to which they belong" (Ibid., p. 11).

While narratives are not treated as inherently emancipatory, language is the only way to address language's failure and find breaches in it.[13] In this sense, the political dimension of the texts and films exposed in this dissertation is not merely determined by their subject matter. Their politics of aesthetics lies in the dissensual ways places, bodies and modes of relationship are portrayed; in how what is said does not fit with what is shown; in the different temporalities and rhythms that are

[12] Non-refugees writers and filmmakers are the authors of the chosen works. The exception is the Palestinian Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, who has arrived in Europe from Syria with no documents and is one of the directors of the documentary *On the Bride's Side*. As chapter 6 shows, he receives Italian citizenship during the film. Besides that, refugees had direct involvement in the making of some of the works analyzed in the dissertation, but they are not self-representations.

[13] Analyzing Hobbes' contradictions in the use and the condemnation of metaphors, which will be analyzed in chapter 2, Stillman (1995, p. 799) affirms: "[t]hose contradictions are inevitable because there is no place from which to intervene against the errancies of language and desire outside of language and desire."

brought up together, recombining the action and feelings of characters, which do not always coincide; in a tension between the historical time they are inscribed in, attached to the plot, the action, and non-linear and therefore less straight-forward narratable sensations of ordinary life.

2
Making and unmaking refugeeness: framing a problem

> *'Refugee', I said. 'Asylum.'*
> *He looked up, and I dropped my eyes. His were angry. 'So you do speak English,' he said. 'Mr Shaaban, you've been taking the piss.'*
> *'Refugee,' I repeated. 'Asylum.' I glanced up as I said this, and started to say it a third time, but Kevin Edelman interrupted me. His face had gone slightly darker and his breathing had changed, had become less easy to match. He breathed deeply twice, making a visible effort to control himself when what he would really have liked to do was to pull a lever and have the floor beneath me open into an airy and bottomless drop. I know, I have wished the same myself on many occasions in my earlier life.*
> *'Mr Shaaban, do you speak English?,' his voice mellowing again, but this time more sweaty than oily, officially soft-spoken now, labouring. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. I was catching up with his breathing again.*
> *'Refugee,' I said, pointing at my chest. 'Asylum.'*
> *(…) It must have been the tiny room and the duplicitous courtesy with which he was speaking to me that made me feel I was a prisoner, when both he and I knew that I was trying to get in and he was trying to keep me out. Wearily, he leafed through my passport, and I felt again that I was a tiresome nuisance, causing people needless trouble and inconvenience. Then he left me in the room again while he went to consult and check.*
>
> (Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea*)

2.1
Categories of mobility: a nuisance

In 2015, the media worldwide extensively reported a "migratory crisis." Hundreds of thousands of people, many from Syria but also from Libya, Iraq and other countries in war or with political repression, had been traveling for days on

foot and by boat to go to Europe. While many died before the end of the journey, a large part was arriving in European countries. In September 2015, after taking the so-called Balkan route, several thousands of people camped in railway stations in Hungary, whose government had canceled trains to Western Europe. With this measure, the Hungarian government was trying to stick to the Dublin Regulation, which determines that the asylum application must be in the first European country of arrival. Since Hungary would probably deny their asylum claims, those people wanted to leave the country before being registered there.[14] Even after having spent weeks or months on risky journeys through different countries, many of the displaced people refused to ask for asylum in Hungary and walked together toward the Austrian border, even though it was shut for their passage, also to guarantee the enforcement of the Dublin Regulation. Germany was their aimed final destiny. The mass movement prompted the opening of borders by the Austrian and German governments. Even though this opening was only temporary, it fostered a mediatic discourse of a humanitarian welcoming of refugees by European countries. The impact of the discourse of benevolence in relation to the arrival of displaced people in Western Europe was stronger than not-so-benevolent measures such as the subsequent harshening of the asylum law in Germany, the recodification of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in the Mediterranean or the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement, through which the European Union aimed at creating a barrier to the arrival of new would-be asylum seekers[15] via Turkey.[16]

The week before, big news outlets had started questioning the use of the word *migrant* to refer to the people arriving in Europe. "The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean. It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative," wrote Barry Malone, then editor of Al Jazeera English online, explaining that the medium would use the word *refugee*

[14] Chapters 4 and 6 will discuss more the Dublin Regulation.

[15] I will use the formulation "would-be asylum seekers" when willing to highlight a condition of people who still fight for the right to claim asylum. Nevertheless, most of the time I will refer to *refugees* as a logic, a social perception and discourse regarding the making of refugeeness – one that this chapter aims to frame.

[16] The agreement stipulated that in exchange for six billion euros until the end of 2018, all undocumented migrants arriving at the Greek islands from Turkey would be returned to Turkey, no matter their country of origin.

instead of *migrant* "for reasons of accuracy."[17] According to him, when one says migrant, "[i]t is not a person – like you, filled with thoughts and history and hopes – who is on the tracks delaying a train. It is a migrant. A nuisance." Al Jazeera's editorial decision was praised a few days later by newspapers such as the North American *The Washington Post*[18] and the British *The Guardian*[19]. In both cases, the justification was that the word *migrants* was being used by politicians and right-wing movements to scare citizens, referring to people entering Europe without deserving it. The term migrant had been politicized, and this was not good. Naming them *refugees*, instead, would be more accurate and keep the humanity of those named as such. The week of events culminated in a massive campaign on social media for the use of the word *refugees* instead of *migrants*, in a compassionate rhetoric of a refugee crisis substituting the discourse of a migrant crisis (De Genova, 2017, p. 2-3). That happened especially after the intense public commotion with the death of a Syrian Kurdish toddler, whose body was photographed on a Turkish beach and reproduced all over the world after he, his mother and his brother died when trying to cross to Greece on a rubber dinghy. His name was Alan Shenu, but he was called Aylan "Kurdi" ("the curd") by Turkish authorities, and this is how he has become known worldwide.

It seems almost like an old story since the media has focused on other "crises" regarding migrants or refugees, such as the hundreds of thousands of people who have left Ukraine because of the war, even though their stories are also less and less reported. But I tell it for mainly two interconnected reasons. First, although discussions regarding terminology concerning migration were not at all new in 2015, it was a crucial moment in the reinforcement of the *refugee* as a moral category of those deserving to enter and be welcomed. Even if most media outlets, in general, have since then used *migrant* and *refugee* interchangeably – as well as

[17] "Why Al Jazeera Will Not Say Mediterranean 'Migrants'," August 20, 2015. Available on: www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/8/20/why-al-jazeera-will-not-say-mediterranean-migrants. Last access: March 31, 2023.
[18] "Is It Time To Ditch the Word 'Migrant'?," August 24, 2015. Available on: www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/24/is-it-time-to-ditch-the-word-migrant/. Last access: March 31, 2023.
[19] "We Deride Them As 'Migrants'. Why Not call Them People?," August 28, 2015. The text argues that "'refugees', 'displaced people' and 'asylum seekers', terms that have clear definitions, are more useful and accurate terms than a catch-all label like 'migrants.' Available on: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/28/migrants-people-refugees-humanity. Last access: March 31, 2023.

right-wing movements, which appropriate them according to the circumstances – the plea for the "accurate" term has also continued. It indicated a move by good-intentioned people, be they professionally involved with the matter or not, who would frequently justify the distinction as a way to protect the ones who suffered and needed most, a measurement usually related to a lack of choice in displacement.[20] This move was not restricted to Europe. As chapter 3 shows, this was also writer Valeria Luiselli's move in framing unaccompanied children who arrived at the border of the United States and Mexico in 2015 and for whom she was a volunteer translator. While willing to escape a restricted narrative about migrants, she also wanted to guarantee their protection, and affirms, in the essay *Tell Me How it Ends*: "The children who cross Mexico and arrive at the U.S. border are not 'immigrants,' not 'illegals,' not merely 'undocumented minors.' Those children are refugees of a war, and, as such they should all have the right to asylum" (Luiselli, 2017, p. 89).

Second, it was by that time that many questions driving this dissertation around the disjuncture between categorization and experiences of migration started to be nurtured. Living in Berlin at that time, and working as a journalist with Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, or "guest workers" – another category full of a heavy and sticky weight – I have closely followed a renewal of the myth around the figure of the refugee. The problem of a depoliticized representation of the refugee as an abstract figure of protection was not new. Critical migration scholars had already addressed the pitfalls of the division between voluntary and forced migration in contemporary border regimes, and have been highlighting the subjective dimension of migration.[21] However, there seemed to be a reinforcement of the figure of the refugee as a passive victim in public discourse; an image consolidated in opposition to the migrant understood as a burden. While this distinction has shifted according to specific political contexts, it has generally implied a strategic illegalization of

[20] On February 6, 2016, *The Guardian* published the article "To Help Real Refugees, Be Firm With Economic Migrants," by Nick Cohen, who argued: "If you want to be a true liberal and persuade your society to accept genuine refugees, you must accept authoritarian measures and agree to the rapid expulsion of illegal immigrants." Available on: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/06/liberals-harsh-truths-help-refugees-syria. Last access: March 31, 2023.

[21] By that time, authors from the so-called autonomy of migration approach, such as De Genova (2002) and Mezzadra (2004), had already been referring to migrants in general, including refugees, to specify the bordering and illegalizing processes relating to people's movement and worried about the workings of capitalism in migration. See also Johnson (2014) on the insufficiency of the paradigm of forced versus voluntary migration in regimes of border control.

some displaced people and their exclusion from the international refugee regime through the idea of crisis, whose temporalities "simultaneously produce migration as a future threat *and* erase its past, its historicity" (Atoui, 2020, p. 212, emphasis in original). Researching migration to the UK, specifically of migrants/refugees in the Calais camp, at the French border to England, Atoui shows the relationship between illegalization and "specifically (non-white) bodies according to a neocolonialist logic of racial and class hierarchy and differentiation, [which] produces them as vulnerable and exploitable subjects" (Ibid., p. 213).[22] As Danewid (2017, p. 8) states, referring to pro-refugee activism in Europe:

> By divorcing the ongoing Mediterranean crisis from Europe's long history of empire and racial violence, these left-liberal interventions ultimately turn questions of accountability, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality.

In Germany, beyond the debate on terminology,[23] refugees were welcomed by citizens with posters and food at the main point of arrival, Munich's train station, the same place where most "guest workers" had arrived 50 years earlier, before being sent to different parts of the country. Social entrepreneurship related to the theme flourished in the country in the period, and there was the creation of a myriad of initiatives for volunteers who wanted to help newcomers, to the point that I have heard people involved in those activities in Berlin referring to them as *my* refugees. This formulation is reproduced in a few dialogues of the novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015), by the German writer Jenny Erpenbeck, translated to English by Susan Bernofsky as *Go, Went, Gone* (2017). The book, analyzed in chapter 4, is about the relationship of a retired German Professor, Richard, with African refugees in Berlin. At some point, after a robbery at Richard's apartment, one of his friends asks: "Did anyone know you were going to be away that night? Yes, Richard says. One of *your Africans*?, Sylvia asks. Yes, says Richard. Which one? The piano player." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 301, my emphasis). Later, Richard repeats: "Do you

[22] Atoui (2020) analyzes the concealment of the relationship between the history of European imperialism that frames the "migrant crisis" as a novelty/urgency, and an analysis of how Calais, in France, is historically a place of transit for migrants and has connections to the Sangatte Refugee Center, opened in 1999 by the French Red Cross. See also El-Enany (2020) on the relationship between colonialism and the construction of different categories of mobility in the UK.

[23] In Germany, one of the central debates was the need to change the word *Flüchtling*, which could be translated as a refugee but also as a passive fugitive, to *Geflüchtete*, which indicates a more active process of flight.

think it was *my piano player*?" (Ibid., p. 306, my emphasis), referring to a refugee who used to play the piano at his place.

It struck me how *refugee* had easily become a business, a product, a hobby. The characters in *Go, Went, Gone* are inspired by actual would-be asylum seekers who used to camp in a square in the center of Berlin from 2012 to 2014. By the time of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, few connections were made between those mostly African asylum seekers and the new refugees. The illegalization of the black Africans, who would claim rights publicly, was not attributed to the newcomers. Syrians had their asylum procedures fastened and the Dublin regulation disregarded in Germany. In parallel, the objectification of the refugee experience has been reinforced by "humanitarian reason" (Fassin, 2012). A "speechless" figure (Malkki, 1996; Rajaram, 2002) was again reaffirmed as a precondition for deservingness of refugee status, which, as this chapter examines, has strongly remained attached to the contemporary political imaginary even with the historical changes in the types of displacement and in the refugee regime since the middle of the 20th Century.

In reaction to what Apostolova (2015) called "categorical fetishism," activists, journalists and researchers explicitly criticized the hierarchy of mobility implied by the line separating refugees from migrants. Many followed Bernd Kasparek and Marc Speer (2015) and referred to the 2015 events as the "long summer of migration," a term that avoids the word *refugee* but also the language of crisis, avoids an exceptionality that erases historical conditions and social and political contexts of migratory movements. In the face of the fragile opposition between forced-passive-deserving refugees and willing-opportunistic-undeserving migrants, more scholars emphasized the use of an encompassing term *migrant* for all who move and desire better conditions of life, be the cause poverty, war or political persecution.[24] This approach points to the first problem of "categorical fetishism," which is the measurement of suffering and vulnerability and the labeling

[24] Some examples are Apostolova (2015), Crawley and Skleparis (2018) and El-Enany (2020), besides authors related to the autonomy of migration literature, like De Genova (2002, 2017), Mezzadra (2004, 2015), Mezzadra and Neilson (2013). As Apostolova (2015) frames it, "[t]he purpose is also, doing so, to restitute to migration its double meaning, both political and economic. Not only are refugees almost always victims of failing economies within a globally unequal system, but 'economic migration' itself, as an outcome of the workings of global capitalism, is an inherently political problem and has to be recognized as such. In this critical version the term 'migrant' retains its function as a signifier of social class – a dimension which the individualistic frame latent in the fiction of the voluntary 'economic migrant' erases."

of migrants it enables.[25] This type of measurement can serve discourses identified with both progressive and right-wing inclinations and it can either imply more inclusive changes in policy or the intensification of migratory controls. That was shown by the harshening of legal and administrative decisions regarding asylum in Europe after the "long summer." As Apostolova (2015) reminds us, the future effects of choosing a category to try to guarantee rights to some are not predictable, as the different historical usages and reappropriations of words such as immigrants or refugees show. The term immigrant, for example, was once used in France to avoid the taboo word "worker" in the national public debate, while nowadays it is the avoided one (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 68).

Most importantly, categorical fetishism means that there is a reproduction of political identity patterns without an engagement with the "politics of bounding," or "the process by which categories are constructed, the purpose they serve and their consequences," as Crawley and Skleparis (2018, p. 60) state. The authors argue that the privilege of *refugees* over *migrants*, besides discriminating against migrants, reinforces "the faulty foundations of the binary distinction between the two categories" (Ibid). As Basaran and Guild (2017) analyze, even in critical migration studies, changes in categories usually try to include "others," but don't question the violence and arbitrariness of categories themselves.

> When illegal is transformed into irregular, enemy combatants into detainees, mixed flows into refugees, important valuations are contested, securitizations critiqued, but these labels nonetheless confirm the distinctiveness of specific human movements, leaving intact the very populations that have been created through state-centric discourses. The critique reaffirms the statist categories by leaving in place their boundaries, but providing them with different labels so as to change their normative association. Often this is linked to a political strategy of granting access or inclusion, either pursued on a legal terrain or through acceptable policy option or discursive transformation. *The effect is nonetheless the affirmation of political and legal categories, labels and distinctions, even if with the intent of critique, access and renewed valuation thereof* (Basaran and Guild, 2017, p. 274-275, my emphasis).

[25] Even this approach can be problematic if it disregards the heterogeneity of subjects and motivations in the plea for the generalization of the term "migrant." As the anthropologist Alice Elliot stressed in an online lecture for her graduate course "Borders and Migration" at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2022: "In this critical evaluation, the boundaries between refugee and migrant – discursive and legal boundaries – are often made on the ground that both/all move in a context of desperation, dispossession and poverty. The arguments for abolishing the distinction are often made on the premise that all the people on the move are motivated by dispossession." This dissertation aims to pay attention to desire and joy beyond the dispossession of migrant subjects.

Basaran and Guild point to a reinforcement of state-centric discourses through the change of labels, because categorizations depend on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that, in the case of migration, do not disturb the logic of spatial bordering. We see these mechanisms working in the disputes of categories of migration that are supposed to guarantee rights to some while excluding others. They work in the inclusion-exclusion continuum because they function in accordance with an ideal figure to which there is no fundamental variation: the citizen, which is the proper way of political belonging in a state order with fixed borders. Citizenship is still our regulative ideal of political belonging, I argue, one so hard to circumvent because it connects *nomos* and space in modernity (Walker, 2009, 2017), as we will see below; one that not only shapes public policies but haunts our still very much modern imaginaries, even if borders are everywhere being transformed and transgressed – and then recaptured by power technologies, just to be transgressed again. "Seeing like a state" (Scott, 1999) is difficult to get rid of, after all.

In practice, citizens are not at all the same, and race, gender, histories of coloniality, local governments and public policies influence the degrees of rights one has inside a state, even if officially a citizen. That would be the case, for example, of many people who became citizens through *jus solis*, but are children of non-nationals, therefore can have their citizenship taken away, called by Nyers (2009) "accidental citizens"; or those who formally didn't lose citizenship status but in practice have no rights, being "irregular citizens" (Nyers, 2011). But even if the ideal of who a citizen is supposed to be changes historically, there is a fundamental reference to the bond to a state-territory-nation, to fixed borders inside which one can belong, and which until now could not be challenged by the idea of transnational or post-national citizenship.[26] This bond is a constant in the concept of citizenship. So even if there have always been many degrees of rights for citizens inside a state, changing in time and space, or many types of migrants who challenge the stasis of the international system of states, our imagination is still attached to bounded communities and citizenship as the proper way of political belonging. As Johnson (2014, p. 8) recognizes, "[t]here remains an assumption that the

[26] I have elsewhere more closely analyzed the transformations in the concepts of citizenship in the 20th Century, focusing on the discussions about post-national versus transnational citizenship in Europe (Velasco, 2014, p. 40-51).

achievement of citizenship, even an 'activist citizenship' enacted by authorized agents, is the goal. Citizenship is a difficult paradigm to escape, even if it is stretched and adapted."

In a statist and international order in which mobility cannot be completely stopped, but a politics of citizenship should be preserved, categories create a hierarchy of migration that, in framing objects of knowledge, help regulate the excess of mobility, together with bureaucracies, technologies of control and public policies. In this hierarchization, refugees have the "higher" place exactly because they carry the myth of the inevitability of movement: they were forced, they could not stay because the state failed them. In an international states system where everyone has a proper place, only the failure of a state's protection can justify movement. That is nevertheless a temporary solution, even if it lasts. Legally, an individual is not a refugee anymore when the root causes of displacement have ended, even if a whole life has passed, as if political bounds were only inherited and not built in daily lives. There is a suspension of space and time until normalcy, citizenship, is restored, a temporariness that turns the refugee into an abstract figure, devoid of singular experiences. An ideal political belonging only comes with citizenship. In opposition to the citizen, the refugee is the ideal type of non-belonging.

However, refugees' experiences, like all migratory experiences, exceed the predictable narrative of persecution and suffering expected of them, which Woolley (2007) calls the "asylum story." That is more and more clear in contemporary times, when it is harder to draw the line between voluntary migration and forced movement, which grounds the figure of the non-excessive refugee, as we will see below. Pointing to the crisis of the lexicon and concepts related to migration, Mezzadra (2015) stresses that it is not only the idea of "forced" that is questioned by looking at the subjective dimension of migration but also the "voluntary," because this term implies that no objective conditions would count for the decision to migrate. In the end, there will always be a degree of "freedom" and "coercion," and this degree cannot be exactly measured. Situations of extreme violence are of course many times determinant reasons impelling the movement of people who would not be willing to move. What I want to stress here is the problem of measuring degrees of force or choice to determine the necessity (and deservingness)

of migrating.[27] Mezzadra (Ibid.) proposes to focus instead on the tension between structural forces and the possibility of agency, or, using the Foucauldian conceptualization, between subjection and subjectification when analyzing the contexts of migratory movements and the conditions that foster and prevent them.

How do refugees, in the bordering processes of their daily lives, experience excess that cannot be totally captured by structures of power, performatize or oppose categories of the international order? How do stories different from the "asylum story" open ways of thinking politically that are not constrained by spatial imaginations and national belongings, and which are not just stories of resistance against statist practices of bordering, but carry tensions between subjection and subjectification? That is, in general terms, the macro challenge of this dissertation. It nevertheless departs from the assumption that there is not a single answer to this question, but multiple provisional possibilities experienced in concrete contexts, fragments of lives that defy the totalizing modern political imaginary. The dissertation examines the excess of refugees' experiences and how they challenge modern spatial imaginaries through contemporary fictional prose, essays, feature films and documentaries, showing the limitations and the deviations of the use of the category of *refugee* in the 21st century. I aim to do it, as pointed out in the introduction, "not only for the empirical information they offer, but also for the theoretical work they do – for the ways they speculate upon ontological, epistemological, and political questions" (Kazanjian, 2016, p. 140).

Before looking more closely at the historical and conceptual making of the category of the refugee, which directly relates to the centrality of citizenship in our political imaginary and influences the type of stories told about refugees, this chapter will address the intimate relationship between language and the international order. The next section analyzes how the spatial idea of a border dividing territorialized jurisdictions as fixed containers for politics relates to the cognitive border that separates subject and world, requiring a language of stability, a rigid vocabulary and grammar to manage and control who is allowed to move (Walker, 2009, 2017). But even in the foundations of modernity, the taming of language can never completely succeed. Through Hobbes' political theory, the

[27] In a footnote in her text *Home and Away* (1999, p. 346), Sara Ahmed stresses how constraints to choice are constitutive of subjects, but also recognizes the need to "theorise differences in the way in which force operates, and between degrees of force."

chapter shows that, while language is central to the founding of a self-determined autonomous subject, with stable boundaries, capable of knowing, capturing and stabilizing the world, even the most categorical language always has a vacuum, an ambivalence that exceeds its stable meanings. In relating territorial and cognitive borders in modernity, but also pointing to the failure of the stability of language/space, I justify the move to address more unstable forms of representation of refugees to help rethink the relationship between man and world, or that which exceeds predictability in movement between borders/boundaries.

There is a disconnection between the subjective experiences of those who migrate and the formal categories through which subjectivities are known, marginalized and controlled. The excess of experiences is surely not exclusive to migrants. Nevertheless, they are exemplary of the excess over modern political categories since they represent a paradox of the international system of states, or the modern international, to use Walker's term: they are at the same time produced by this order and an exception to it, an exception that must remain as such if this order is to be reproduced; they, at the same time, fit modern spatial political categories and exceed them, as the subsequent section of the chapter analyzes. The excess of migrants' experiences, then, defies the modern spatial political imaginary and the connection between territorial and cognitive borders.

If migrants are a paradox of the modern international – at the same time constitutive of the bounded system of states and an exception to it – the *refugee* has been a central category through which states have been trying to handle this paradox since the middle of the 20th Century. The chapter analyzes how the making of refugeeness maintains the modern international in its place: someone only becomes a refugee if they are forced to, if the state fails them (Haddad, 2008). Other migrants would not have to leave. That does not mean that refugees are only pictured as victims; they are also despised as non-desirable, as the continuing popularity of nationalist/populist parties opposed to immigration suggests. What I argue is that the figure of the refugee is historically framed as a way of states dealing with the excess of migration in the international order, as the inevitable exception to be recaptured by the logic of the modern international as a non-excessive category, a category in suspension until normalcy – citizenship – is restored.

The chapter then examines how a story of persecution, performed in a predictable narrative without contradiction, beacons procedures of eligibility and

refugees' access to legal rights. It is what Woolley (2017) calls the "asylum story," whose peculiarly restrictive set of narrative conditions reproduce ideal models of refugeeness. As the exceptional model in the logic of political belonging, refugees should have no stuttering in telling their stories to be legitimized and eventually reinserted into the politics of citizenship. The stuttered and unexpectable stories are the ones of the illegalized, irregularized: these are the excessive ones, who should have no place in a system of fixed borders. With the background discussion on the making of refugeeness and its place in preserving the stability and predictability of the modern international, I end the chapter thinking about the meaning of dissident asylum stories and how they can unmake refugeeness not by erasing or totally refusing the category but by playing with its ambivalences and rearranging a given perceptual field (Rancière, 2004, 2007, 2008).

2.2
(De)stabilizing *nomos* and space

Forms of mapping and geometrically representing the world, developed from a change in philosophical and mathematical conceptions in the 17th century, were fundamental to consolidating a measurable space as the territorial state, facilitating exclusion and control (Elden, 2005, p. 14-15). This "moral geography" (Shapiro, 1997, p. 21), based on territory, depends on an assumption of homogeneity, according to which state sovereignty, in the form of law, guarantees an order, although never fulfilled, in its interior. In *Violent Cartographies*, Shapiro (Ibid., p. 24-28) analyzes a map of Manhattan from the end of the 17th century, in which the geometrical order of a city contrasts with bodies of native peoples close to nature, in irregular movements. The illustration is an example of the representation of space in which instability caused by barbarians threatens the urban order. This type of representation would become recurrent in the following centuries, but Shapiro highlights the fact that, at the beginning of the 20th Century, indigenous people would disappear from maps, as if they had never existed. According to these North American cartographies, European colonizers occupied an empty space. In what he calls "genealogy of forgetfulness," Shapiro (Ibid., p. 20) stresses the violence implied in the elimination of difference, which, he

remembers, always maintains a residue, even though it does not appear in state representations.

Shapiro evidences the historical contingency of what Lefebvre (1991) conceptualizes as abstract space, which prevails in the spatial representation of modernity. Lefebvre questions the conception of abstract space as an empty form that can be fulfilled by different independent contents, sustaining that space is constituted by social practices, not a container occupied by them. According to the modern abstract spatial representation, space is independent of subjects. It is homogeneous, geometric, form separated from substance, depending on the presumption of a-historicity to hide the relations of power involved in its making. Lefebvre (1991, p. 170-174) also stresses the violence implied in the representation of an absence, since it allows space to be indefinitely quantified, divided, accounted for, repressing differences and avoiding any qualification of space.[28] Modernity is founded not only on specific techniques for erasing differences in representation, but also on the erasure of the violence implied in them, producing the appearance of a natural order. Nevertheless, this erasure always leaves its residues. It is, in this sense, a deferral of the problem of difference, as formulated by Innayatullah and Blaney (2004).

Modernity works according to the concept of abstract space, connected to the territorial state as a regulative ideal of political belonging. This conceptual move, broadly located in the 17th century, founds a political tradition of measuring the world, consolidating categories and solidifying language as law. By this move, subjects can be separated from the world by a boundary, be it between subject and state, state and international system of states, or system of states and the world (Walker, 2009, 2016). In any case, what is left outside can always be known, because it is something separated from a bounded subjectivity, and further internalized. The separation of man from the world is a fundament of modern subjectivity, of shaping an objective outside that can be brought in by man through knowledge; it is the possibility that the subject fixes a boundary between him and

[28] "[T]here are beneficiaries of space, just as there are those excluded from it, those "deprived of space"; this fact is ascribed to the 'properties' of space, to its 'norms,' although in reality something very different is at work" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 289).

an externality that he[29] can identify, measure and represent. This split gives the modern subject the possibility of being sovereign, of stabilizing and internalizing the world as if its boundaries were fixed, as if unpredictability could be tamed through knowledge.

The stability of political categories – and how migrants/refugees experience and exceed them – depends on the separation between modern subjects and the world, fundamental to the fixity of a spatiality where movement must be predictable and controllable (Ibid.). An international order in which subjects are spatially bounded is intrinsically related to a language that guarantees stasis, a politics of categorization in which meanings are stable and maintain the appearance of a regularity of displacement between nation-states, and also homogeneity inside them. Even if we are all the time reminded of political contingency and excess, and if contemporary displacements increasingly challenge this regulative ideal of territorial political belonging, our imagination still works according to the idea of the *polis*. The consolidation of a philosophical tradition of quantifying space and language, a cartographical and geometric representation of the world, which tames time in a spatial order to guarantee predictability, still collects its effects. Nevertheless, as we will see below, through Hobbes' political theory, even the most ingenious defense of the geometrization of language in the search for truth cannot avoid recognizing the insufficiency of categories, the instability and ambivalence retained by language.

2.2.1
The vacuum of language

Language plays a crucial role in Hobbes' political theory of the state. As the condition of possibility for reasoning, it is key to overcoming the particularities of men, enabling them to orderly live in society. Hobbes (1997 [1651]) considers that only names are universal.[30] Since everything is particular except names, the law, through the definitions it conveys, can guarantee man knows the consequences of not obeying it: there is no possibility of the law being unjust, it is absurd to think

[29] This is a modern *man*, a male figure. I thank Victor Coutinho Lage for pointing this out at an IPS online workshop on May 15, 2020, when I presented the initial theoretical problematizations guiding this dissertation referring to a "he/she."

[30] When Hobbes writes about names, he is not only referring to words, but also to a group of words that form a concept together. Names can be more broadly thought of as definitions, categories.

about (in)justice outside the frame of the law (Ibid., p. 71, 80, 133). Through the precise definitions of names, laws can be established, delimit what is right or wrong and rule men living together. They give predictability to actions so that a commonwealth can exist, otherwise, people would always be vulnerable to each other's unstable individual passions, related to inconstancy, movement, change. Hobbes is obsessed with ordering the world to prevent being caught by the surprises of life, its permanent motion. Those surprises are repeatedly related to movement, which carries the possibility of change. *Leviathan* highlights that by the relationship between senses, motion and instability.

At the same time, and despite all the efforts to the contrary, Hobbes recognizes that language can never totally erase particularities and completely tame contingency. Even though Hobbes builds *Leviathan* with a method of obsessively defining names through a language free from ambiguities and metaphors, in order to guarantee predictability, he ends up recognizing the impossibility of the law to fully achieve it, since there is always going to be a degree of change in political life. "There is no such thing as perpetuall tranquillity of mind, while we live here; because *life itself is but Motion*, and can never be without Desire, nor without Fear, no more than without Sense" (Hobbes, 1997, p. 37, my emphasis). Hobbes constantly compares language with geometry but at the same time recognizes that language can never equal geometry even in its most precise definitions. Although the law (and not experience or examples) defines what is right or wrong, it will never give men total assurance, because, unlike geometry, it is related to passions, inescapable of man's life; it regulates things that have inconstant meanings because they affect us differently (Ibid., p. 58-59). Importantly, while condemning the ambiguity of language as an obstacle to achieving truth, Hobbes not only recognizes the insufficiency of definitions but his own text is full of metaphors, which have both "affective force and conceptual utility" in his argument (Stillman, 1995, p.

806).[31] "What the work *does* is as important as what it *says*, as a linguistic gesture that carries meaning and power with it" (Ibid.). To begin with the title, *Leviathan*.[32]

In Hobbes' nominalism, which conditions universals to names, language and reasoning are not independent of the body, but derive directly from the senses, since both body and mind are material. For Hobbes, all sensations are the effect of motions inside the organs of the body, of pressures and resistances to these pressures (Hobbes, 1997, p. 11-12). However, there is still a dualism between sense and reason, reflected in the permanent tension of a particularity that has to be tamed (therefore is always absolute, can't be reasoned on/against) and submitted to the predictability of knowledge, always conditioned to definitions agreed upon. This tension slides through the whole book of *Leviathan*. It is the tension between experience and sapience, prudence and science, passion and law, reflecting a contingency that might endanger life in community and the path to control it. Looking at a past action, experience gives signs to indicate what may come next, but it doesn't give enough certainty to guarantee a future which, in the end, is always "a fiction of the mind" (Ibid., p. 18). Experience gives man prudence, which is important in community. But prudence still relates man to time passed, to what he experienced *before*; only through science can man control time, motion, contingency, by predicting the consequences of names: time, what comes next, becomes a pattern of regularity.

During the first part of the book, which departs from the senses to theorize reasoning, Hobbes recognizes many times that passions are not to be ceased, but indicates they can be overcome or maintained in the private matters of men. He is

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[31] Stillman (1995) analyses how Hobbes uses figurative language to build his whole argument in *Leviathan*, contradicting his attacks against metaphors, common to 17th century philosophical thoughts but which gained prominence in Hobbes: "In a political discourse whose claims to geometrical certainty appear challenged, if not compromised, by the employment of such vehicles of contentious and seditious equivocation the repeated recourse to metaphor is deeply unsettling. The text earnestly disavows traditional forms of rhetoric while reintroducing rhetorical devices, thereby advertising what its claims to certainty have been busily attempting to conceal from the outset: its own textual insufficiency" (Ibid., p. 807). As Stillman (Ibid., p. 810) notes, "[t]he desire to erase desire, the urgent quest to discover laws for what has already been defined as the lawless, itself generates metaphors as traces of the desire that cannot be effaced."

[32] Hobbes, a political theorist who hated metaphors, titled what it would become his most famous book with the name of a sea monster from the Old Testament, Leviathan. The man who advocated a language free of ambiguities chose an image for the commonwealth whose symbolisms of power, threat and indestructibility had inspired centuries of religious myths, philosophical considerations and works of art. It is a metaphor, not an analogy. It is there without any comparisons or references, in the title of the book first published in 1651. It was not necessary for Hobbes to define it. By the time he wrote *Leviathan*, it evoked, as a good metaphor, common associations and feelings of fear, power, submission and reverence.

aware motion is still there, because desire only ceases with death (Ibid., p. 43, 56), but tries to control it by fixing the state and its future in laws and contracts: if consequences can be predicted, contingency can be prevented.[33] He goes from time/change to space/fixity with reasoning. Reasoning relates to the possibility of predicting the world to maintain order, erasing misunderstanding and conflict. That is why the names of incorporeal bodies are senseless and absurd, and metaphors, open to different meanings, can never be ground for reasoning. That is why the signification of words must be constant, which is only achieved by precise definitions. Taming time is necessary if men want to preserve life and live in peace, since war means not only current battles, but also the risk that they happen in the future (Ibid., p. 70). For that reason, men, fearing death, agree in establishing laws and contracts to define their obligation and duties in time. In Hobbes' political theory, covenants create obligations to a future time aiming at the ideal moment of a legal system in which intrinsically there are no conflicts anymore, only rules to be applied and followed (Balibar, 2010, p. 56).

In the second part of *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes theorizes the commonwealth, it becomes more evident that the law alone is not able to assure peace. In chapter XXVI, he recognizes language is not pure; it may be misinterpreted, because of the variety of meanings of words. After building his theory of reasoning through the precision of definitions, Hobbes highlights here the imprecision of language. Aiming to validate the supreme power of the sovereign, here he does not insist on a language free from ambiguities anymore. If there is any doubt in the written word of the law, it is the sovereign who can decide, because he, as the legislator, knows the "final causes" of it. It seems not so simple, at this point, to know the consequences of names only through their definitions. The law always allows for some interpretation (which is not the case with geometry), to which the sovereign has the final word (Hobbes, 1997, p. 138).

To justify this apparent change in his thought, Hobbes makes a fundamental move to equal the word of the law to the word of the sovereign. In the same way that men's absolute natural rights are transferred to the law in a state, conditioning their acts to it, men transfer their names to the sovereign (Doliwa, 2003, p. 47). In

[33] As Walker (2009, p. 63) affirms, "Hobbes' guiding instinct was to transform all opportunities for temporal contingency into the possibility of spatial order, the order he understood especially in geometrical terms inherited from Euclid."

the same way that language/law is defined by the human will (by the arbitrariness of where to draw a line), the sovereign, as language/law, draws his own lines and defines what is right or wrong, just or unjust. In Hobbes' theory, exclusions allowed and naturalized by the sovereign have direct relationship to language's definitions that were agreed upon in a commonwealth, to "the disciplining of knowledge through which the exclusions have been maintained" (Shaw, 2004, p. 12). It is a disciplining, though, that can't ever totally succeed. Categories are always insufficient.[34]

Therefore, the whole effort of *Leviathan*'s first part, of grounding stability for men to peacefully live together, can never be fully achieved if there is not a supreme power, Leviathan, whose totality beyond language brings assurance where language shows its vacuum.[35] There is a vacuum of language in the impossibility of knowing all the consequences of names through their definition in the law, since passions remain. Vacuum here is not meant as something outside the law, but an ambivalence where there can be a dispute about the letter of the law, where words must be interpreted because their definitions are not enough. And this vacuum gives room to the sovereign to have the final words in all controversies, if the final goal of a commonwealth is the maximum stabilization of social relations, maintenance of order, predictability, the fixing of time in space. In the vacuum of the law, there where it cannot assure that the future is not anymore "a fiction of the mind" (Hobbes, 1997, p. 18), comes the Leviathan to control motion and change.

As Walker (2009, p. 193) states, a "name is, after all, only a name, and is subject to patterns of differentiation that have no necessary relation to the differentiation of whatever is named. Nominalism requires some authority to make the name stick." Nevertheless, if state sovereignty is supposed to be this authority, it is "a nominalist solution, one rooted ultimately in the arbitrary character of all

[34] There is an effort in *Leviathan* of totalizing an explanation, departing from man's senses to the commonwealth step by step, to obsessively take account of every aspect of it, establishing the consequences of affirmation to affirmation, and guaranteeing nothing gets out of control through reasoning. There is a limit to reasoning, though. Reasoning is what makes man decide to abandon his absolute liberty to survive. It is a life of immobility. Nevertheless, reasoning is only part of the story. It is also because of fear (also desire and hope, but mostly through fear), that he transfers his name to the sovereign. As Oakeshott (1997, p. 318) affirms, man "remains fundamentally a creature of passion, and it is by passion not less by reasoning that he achieves his salvation."

[35] As Stillman (1995, p. 12-13) states, "[p]hilosophy exposes its own inadequacy before the court of truth in order to compel the creation of the sole authority that can make philosophical truth realizable as historical fact: the fiat of sovereign power."

names." Therefore, just like language is not absolute, requiring its definitions to be reassured, sovereignty needs to perform, be "put into practice" (Ibid., p. 192).

> As Hobbes saw well enough, and others soon saw even more clearly, what legalese can put together, legalese can quickly tear apart. Absolute sovereignty slides into legitimate revolution. Absolute authority has itself no absolute ground to stand on. What counts is the degree to which people can be persuaded to underwrite the sovereign power, can be persuaded by the proper curriculum, by the proper religion, by civic education. Hobbes may have been an archetypical nominalist in this respect, but he was certainly more prescient than most about *the need for names to perform*: to work so as to prevent slippages in definition, to guarantee the point beyond which certainties of knowledge might otherwise start moving out of control, might start especially to creep along the line heading for infinity, away from the measurably known, out to some world beyond the world that might be mapped within the coordinates of modern (geo)metrics." (Ibid., p. 193, my emphasis)

The taming of contingency and erasure of particularities inside bounded states, proper to Hobbes' political theory, has direct consequences for a politics of knowledge, because it depends on the reassurance of categories free from ambiguities. There is an intrinsic relationship between the spatial imaginary of politics and a stable language of categorizations, classifications; between spatial boundaries (territorial borders) and cognitive boundaries (which determine legal rules) – or *nomos* and space, identity and territory, citizen and state. The convergence of *nomos* and space in modernity, of "limits in law and limits in a particular kind of space" (Walker, 2009, p. 207), erases the conditions to produce the supposedly stable borders that delimit both language and space, placing them in a pre-political sphere. According to this view, politics happens after an ontology is established, after the foundation of sovereignty, in the relationship between already constituted subjects and their sovereign; not in the formation of subjectivity (Shaw, 2004). Political authority and the production of knowledge are inseparable in modernity. There is a "mutually constitutive relationship between what counts as authority in relation to the state and what counts as authority in relation to knowledge about the state or relations among states" (Ibid., p. 17). Political subjectivity, through law and equated with sovereignty, settles the conditions of knowing the world, even though that is achieved through a depoliticizing move, through an appearance of an inevitability of how the world should be, erasing the political conditions of sovereignty to work. It is a move that fundamentally limits our understanding of what it means to engage in politics (Ibid.; Walker, 2017).

Not only the bounded state as the place for politics, but also a bounded predictable language is put into question when migrants/refugees, in their daily lives, don't fit their "proper roles," the ones required for the self-reproduction of the modern international. Despite all the efforts by modern political thought in producing scalar modern subjects through measurement and representation, there is always some excess that can't be captured. Even in the foundations of modernity, as in Hobbes' political theory, the taming of language can never totally erase its traces, a degree of excess in actual lived lives. This prompts us to think about how language and categories frame the world in an attempt to tame movement and change, people who don't fit their proper static roles; but also to remember that language, like law, is never totally exempt from exposing its arbitrariness, from being shaken by contingency, by temporality, by an unpredictable excess. Through the instability and ambivalence retained by language, different stories can be told and tell us other ways of being politically in the world that are not attached to the state, even if inevitably haunted by it, since a spatial ordering still conditions ways of being in the world. Although whenever migrants cross borders a political spatial representation naturalized as the only one possible shows its artificial character, the border insists on regulating political imaginations and territorializing identities.

2.2.2
Migration as a paradox of the modern international

The spatialized narrative of modernity determines a double outside: not only the outside of each spatialized territoriality, but also of a bounded system of states (Walker, 2006, 2016). Modern individual subjectivity, when producing its exteriority as an object, depends on an outside of modernity, depends on the figure of an *other* who is not even capable of producing this subject-object relation (since this *other* is not modern, therefore not separated from the world, nature or God). The possibility to be modern faces the limit to a world that is unknowable, not capable of being tamed, defined and transformed in law. Although there might be a promise to internalize this world, bringing it into modernity, this promise must be kept as a potentiality, because it is exactly the existence of this outside of modernity that allows for the uniqueness of modern subjectivity. If there is an outside to the modern state, which marks differences between particularities, there is also an

outside to the modern international: the barbarian, the one who will never become modern and, therefore, is excluded from representation (Ibid).

Depending on the idea that there is an outside to it – the non-modern world, incapable of being captured – the modern international works as a universality of particularities (spatialized territorialities) that settles the limits where one can be free and equal. Modern man is unique, unbound from nature or non-moderns, but can only exercise this uniqueness as particular citizens inside respective sovereign states, which, in their turn, are separated in a horizontal space. The international system of sovereign states differentiates and distributes citizens as particular ways of being political within a supposed universality of humanity; it promises a reconciliation of the modern subject as both particular and universal, i.e., as framed politically as a citizen inside the state and as a general human. At the same time, citizenship is a precondition for the achievement of humanity. In the international order, it is not possible to be free and equal without exercising a politically situated citizenship, substantiated through national belonging (Walker, 2017).

Migrants are a symbol of this paradox since they are produced by and also disrupt the international order. The figure of the migrant reveals the circularity between universal humanity and particular humans, who are supposed to be autonomous self-determined subjects as citizens in a nation-state, and (only) as such can exercise their humanity. Borders of states define where modern subjects are (or at least should be) as political citizens so that in the future they can be reconciled with humanity. That remains a potentiality. Regarding the aporetic relationship between citizen and human, the way of being political continues to be the exclusive citizen; the merge into a completely inclusive humanity remains a potential, and its maintenance as potentiality is fundamental to the reproduction of the modern international. Migration exposes the paradox between the expectation of reconciliation between citizenship and humanity and the necessity that this reconciliation is always deferred.

In attempts to solve the paradox of citizenship/humanity, citizenship studies have been questioning the attachment of citizenship to the nation-state since the 1990s, stretching the concept, with terms like “cosmopolitan citizenship” (Linklater, 1998), “flexible citizenship” (Ong, 1999), or “post-national citizenship”

(Soysal, 1994; Habermas, 1998, 2001; Enjolras, 2008).[36] Nevertheless, since there is a constitutive opposition between citizen and human, both nationalism and cosmopolitanism are dependent on a political imagination that reproduces nationalist categories. The national and the international grammars are intrinsically connected, and cosmopolitan political imaginations that praise humanity often reproduce nationalist frameworks of imagining communities, in which the modern sovereign state is the exclusive place of politics, of the autonomous subject, to be reproduced in time – a natural order to which there would be no excess (Stephens, 2013). "[E]verywhere that nations exist nationalism reigns", affirms Balibar (2004, p. 23), pointing to the inescapability of nationalism as a framework to think about political community: "we must begin our examination of our limits and particularities of our universal ideas of history, identity, violence, and politics, which, even in our efforts to sketch out alternatives, are still oriented by their relation to the nation" (Ibid., p. 24-25).[37]

The "national order of things" (Malkki, 1995) still informs most studies on migration, even in the claims for cosmopolitanism. Migration has been institutionalized as a self-evident sociological domain of research, related to an understanding of it from the point of view of the nation-state, a methodological nationalism that naturalizes the international order that makes migrants objects of management and control (Scheel and Tazzioli, 2022). This is a process that Tazzioli (2019) calls "the making of migration," i.e., the enactment of some people in movement – and not others – as objects of bordering and regulation practices, in specific contexts. That leads Scheel and Tazzioli (2022, p. 3) to define a migrant as "a person who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary-making that are implicated by the national order of things." The authors do not oppose what a refugee is to this definition. They are more worried about the processes of illegalization that turn

[36] Benhabib (2004, p. 22) defends "bridging the gap," a kind of reconciliation between citizenship and humanity, "to incorporate citizenship claims into a universal human rights regime."

[37] To stress that the nation-state still matters in granting citizenship, with crucial consequences for migrants, Balibar (2004, 2006) prefers to talk about transnational citizenship. In the European case, he is an important thinker to underline the differences between formal citizenship and a "European apartheid," which establishes a series of exclusions inside the continent, specially through the racialization and securitization of migrants. He complexifies the category of citizenship with dimensions such as race and class. (Balibar, 2004, p. 43-45)

some people into migrants, available for control, a political move but naturalized since it is based on a statist point of view.[38]

Migrants are *made*, to use Tazzioli's term, if they, when moving without authorization, show the failure of a system organized in specific territorialized sovereign jurisdictions; but also if they, even having their movement authorized, existentially threaten the purity inside nation-states, showing the failure of the myth of its homogeneity. They are "made to be outside of the nation even as they live on national territory" (Sharma, 2020, p. 4).[39] Being a threat to the stability of the international system of states, some migrants are illegalized while others are granted recognition. I argue that the refugee is a figure through which states, by international law, recognize this constitutive exception, excluding other categories of migration from protection. They are granted protection if they are void of character, connected to their origin, but with no possibility of looking ahead.

2.3
A plot without a name: the making of refugeeness

In a lecture in Berlin, in November 2015, just after the "long summer of migration," Appadurai used the metaphor of a plot without a name to speak about the category of the refugee: "The heart of new traumas of the forced refugee in the new country is that he/she has a plot (a narrative, a story) but no character, identity or name."[40] The possibility of finding a name in a plot depends on a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, 2015), he stressed, to which imagination is fundamental.[41] Imagination would be a condition to challenge representational politics, which looks for inclusion in schemes of power. Modern nation-states, where there is supposedly an equivalency between identity and territory, or *nomos*

[38] Scheel and Tazzioli (2022, p. 2) begin their article remembering the 2015's decision of Al Jazeera English of adopting the term refugee to show how migrant has become a "stigmatizing label."
[39] As Appadurai (2015) states, "modern conceptions of citizenship, tied up with various forms of democratic universalism, tend to demand a homogeneous people with standardized packages of rights. Yet the realities of ethno-territorial thinking in the cultural ideologies of the nation-state demand discrimination between different categories of citizens even when they all occupy the same territory. Resolving these conflicting principles is inevitably a violent and uncivil process."
[40] Lecture at the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (*BIM*) at Humboldt University, November 4, 2015. Available on: https://transaestheticsfoundationdotorg.files.wordpress.com/.../app. Last access: March 1, 2023.
[41] Appadurai (2004, p. 67) affirms: "Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life."

and space, depend on "a tight fit between plot and character (or story and actor, or narrative and identity)," achieved through citizenship. An idealized identity of citizenship, in the end, produces the emptiness of personal histories that do not fit it, in a way that the category of the refugee becomes an abstraction, a pure form. The refugee is produced as "the unspeakable, the unviable, the non-narrativizable," as Dillon (1998, p. 31) states in a text named *The Scandal of the Refugee*:

> the harder a politics conditioned to secure the material production of the coherent identity to which its discourses refer, the more it seems to produce the unspeakable, the unviable, the non-narrativizable… the traumatic, upon which it relies. Yet, also, the more it produces that which it cannot abide, the more the impossibility of its project is confirmed; such that, what remains outside the political subject, set there by the very acts which found the subject, persists as an integrally defining negativity.

Tazzioli (2019, p. 48) states that the stripping out of the subject's history "is not only the result of the state and humanitarian narratives about refugees; rather, it is also the outcome of material and non-discursive techniques through which migrant bodies are targeted, securitized and controlled." However, the discursive dimension is fundamental since refugees' eligibility depends on fitting the plot of forced movement to the character of a passive and suffering victim.[42] This symbolic dimension is connected to the non-discursive mechanisms of control. If there is a making of migration, there is a particular making of refugeeness that works in a very specific way of deprivation of particularities and history, one that turns refugees into passive characters and is challenged by the multiplicity of contemporary experiences of displacement. Importantly, this deprivation of character is not only a product of material techniques and discourses related to practices of securitization and right-wing movements. It also relates to supposedly progressive practices that commodify refugees as speechless bodies totally dependent on protection (Rajaram, 2002), like the ones I have exemplified at the beginning of this chapter. Refugees are then usually represented as a "figureless figure" (Marder, 2022, p. 122) or "figures of lack" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 113):

> the refugee occupies the space of in-between, an ontology of interstitiality, where "he" has a breathing body, but that body is without the political markers of the "human." This ontological precarity explains why refugees continue to be

[42] The relationship between citizenship and agency in modern political thought, as opposed to the refugee's passivity, has framed contemporary discussions of "active citizenship" through migrants' struggles, as will be explored in further chapters.

> persistently represented and understood as figures of lack – homeless specters, abject outsiders, identityless mass, or wastes of globalization. Whether through a politics of humanitarian pity, a theoretical gesture of reclamation, or a point of political critique, refugees are reified as not quite human, and the condition of refugee is not quite tenable as a life to be lived. (Ibid.)

The next section addresses the consolidation of the social category of the refugee since the inter-war period, with its legal institutionalization after World War II, to which the separation between forced and voluntary movement was fundamental, transforming the refugee into an "epistemic object" (Malkki, 1995). As Rajaram (2002, p. 247) affirms, the "[n]arration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western 'experts': refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced." Even though in recent years it has become increasingly difficult to draw the line between forced and voluntary, there is still a moral dimension in the inclusion-exclusion continuum that justifies the right of some to move and ask for refuge, but not of others: some must leave because the state has failed them, while others have a choice.

The subsequent section analyzes how refugees need to adapt to what Woolley (2017) calls "the asylum story," or a narrative that conforms to the specific plot of the "well-founded fear of persecution" prescribed in international law. They must occupy, in this sense, a pre-defined abstract space, independent from the subject who occupies it and carries personal histories that often don't fit the expected idea of who a refugee must be. Their image should be one of a figure without excess, with a promise of future citizenship, a figure with no possibilities of aspirational narratives. As Appadurai (2019, p. 564) states, refugees' stories that have a place in the modern nation-state are "stories of abjection and supplication, and these stories are not easy to convert into the narratives of application and aspiration."

2.3.1
Refugees as 'figures of lack'

In a widely known book in the field of refugee studies, *The Refugee in International Society*, Emma Haddad (2008) analyzes how the refugee as a socially constructed category is dependent on the consolidation of the international system of nation-states in the 20th Century. Before that, in the historical process of state-

building, terms such as émigrés, exiles and refugees had already been used "to confirm the national citizen as the subject of membership in the nation-state" (Haddad, 2008, p. 55). But it is only with a clear correspondence between territorial and political borders that the category of the refugee as we know it today could be possible. She examines how the category was constituted in the inter-war period, when bordering making determined "the placing of people within or, in the case of the refugee, between state territories" (Ibid., p. 113). Even if with different subjects as referents, the modern category of the refugee already existed when the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, was created in 1950 (Ibid., p. 159). According to Haddad, the difference was that after World War I, the logic was to coercively displace and redistribute groups of people to their proper places, helping the creation of homogeneous nation-states (Ibid., p. 120); after World War II, the concept of the refugee acquired an individualistic aspect, with the recognition of the individual right to seek asylum in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and later in the United Nations' 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

In any case, besides the scale of mass displacement and international cooperation in the 20th Century, the main condition for the existence of the modern refugee is the ordering and distribution of people in nation-states, affirms Haddad (Ibid., p. 43): "without political borders that act to delineate separate sovereign states and hence attempt to assign all individuals to one such state, the refugee as a concept would not exist." She places the distinctiveness of the refugee in constitutive connection with the state-bordering of the international system:

> The refugee is included in the states system by virtue of her exclusion; she is part of the system whilst not being part of it, both inside and outside at the same time. This ambiguous status defines the very concept of the refugee, brings the refugee into existence and guarantees the states system a reality and an identity. The refugee is at the threshold between inside and outside. She is an exception: 'The exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included. Thus the refugee blurs the dividing lines that the concept of sovereignty would like to draw between inside and outside. Just as sovereignty is a profoundly paradoxical concept, so the refugee is an ambiguous figure who exists by virtue of her in-between status. (Ibid., p. 63)[43]

[43] Haddad (2008) uses the feminine pronoun when referring to refugees because of the high rates of women in displacement (even though in 2022 the UNHCR figures are pretty much equivalent), but mainly, as she states, because "[i]t questions the concept 'refugee' and exposes the ambiguities of identity in relation to the refugee category and in general" (Ibid., p. 40-41). For the same reason, I

Haddad importantly recognizes the inevitability of the existence of refugees in a system defined by belonging, as a citizen, to a state/territory. However, this inevitability is, for her, connected to the failure of protection by the state, which, in the international system, is the locus of political belonging: "[Refugees] are the result of erecting boundaries, attempting to assign all individuals to a territory within such boundaries, and then failing to ensure universal representation and protection" (Ibid., p. 59). The failure of protection forces people to move; otherwise, they could just be in their proper roles as citizens, and displacement would not be necessary. Haddad reaffirms the possibility of choice as the fundamental difference between refugees and other migrants throughout the book. Refugees are an inevitable consequence of the international modern system of states only because, having the state failed them, they have no other choice but to leave. Voluntary migrants, on the other hand, would not be inevitable, because they have the option of staying, since the state has not failed in representing and protecting them – as if this goal could indeed be accomplished by any state, whose failure is an anomaly in need of correction. According to her suggested definition, "[a] 'refugee' is an individual who has been forced, in significant degree, outside the domestic political community indefinitely" (Ibid., p. 42).

The forced dimension shapes the imaginary of who a refugee is since the inter-war period. But it was after World War II and the UN system, with the right of seeking asylum prescribed in international law, that this was institutionalized. While before World War II "international migration" was generically regulated by the International Labor Organization, the distinction between economic/voluntary migration and forced/involuntary migration became crucial after the creation of the United Nations and it is core to the legal definition of the refugee instantiated in the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which eliminated spatial and temporal restrictions. Before the Protocol, displacement had to be related to events occurred in Europe before 1951. The Geneva Convention states that a refugee is a person who

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside

opt to use "they": to highlight the construction of a general category, which cannot be challenged unless one looks at the singularities under it.

> the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[44]

The cause-effect relationship between a state's lack of protection and displacement prompts states to legally recognize the inevitable existence of refugees, and the necessity of protecting them while irregularizing or even illegalizing other types of mobility, since they would not need to exist. In this sense, "there is literally no way to be an 'illegal refugee'," says Haddad (Ibid., p. 28). Since the failure of protection produces forced movement across international borders, making the refugee inevitable[45], "there is *an added moral obligation* imposed on states by the existence of refugees – the humanitarian demand to admit outsiders into their territory and allow them to belong, at least in part, to their political community" (Ibid., p. 7., my emphasis). The discourse of moral obligation is revisited in discussions of "crisis," when there is a growth of mass displacement, basing the justification for the protection of some, while others are not allowed entry. If there is no illegal refugee, other migrants, those not considered by international law, can be illegalized if they exceed the controlled and predictable movement between states or threaten the mythical homogeneity inside them.

Paradoxically, with recognition of the right to national self-determination in Europe, which supposedly follows the more fundamental Right of Man, citizenship is consolidated as a precondition to humanity (Arendt, 1951). The 20th Century refugee is then born as a problem to be fixed, whose solutions are all related to the normalcy of the system of nation-states, where everyone has their proper place in a territory: naturalization, resettlement or repatriation. The three relate to restoring the "national order of things" (Malkki, 1995). As Nguyen (2019) well puts it, as a constitutive exception, the refugee should have a short life, since the normality is to be a citizen. Combined, the aspects of involuntariness and temporariness – in the sense of the destabilization of an identity/order that should be restored to function, and not in the actual amount of time that one remains a refugee – helped create an image of passivity, a cut in agency that makes refugees manageable by the state and

[44] United Nations General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, July 28, 1951, Art. 1a.

[45] There is a need to have crossed the territorial border to ask for asylum, as if only this crossing could prove the state's failure and the forced displacement.

the civil society. In an international order, after all, it is only through citizenship that humanity might be achieved. After World War II, more than a legal category, refugees became a self-delimited domain of knowledge, an "epistemic object" (Malkki, 1995). Huge mass displacements had to be organized and were highly improvised in the administration of camps and settlements, to which access of a range of professionals had a crucial role in defining the modern European figure of the refugee (Ibid., p. 497-500).

Outside Europe, following the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol, regional instruments broadened the definition of refugees and the recognized causes for their displacement. The 1969 Organization of African Unity[46] Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, which entered into force in 1974, repeats the definition of a refugee in the UN Convention and extends its causes to "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality."[47] The 1984 Cartagena Declaration, adopted by the Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America, Mexico and Panama, has also extended the causes of leaving one's country if "their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."[48] These documents have been used to widen the range of people under protection, but the refugee as a discursive category remained one attached to involuntariness and temporariness, clearly separated from other migrants. The Cartagena Declaration, for example, explicitly recommends "[t]o adopt the terminology established in the Convention and Protocol (…) with a view to distinguishing refugees from other categories of migrants."

El-Enany (2007, p. 4) analyzes how even in Europe there was a broader interpretation of who refugees are, but it nevertheless has been accompanied by a series of restrictive measures for the entry of displaced people, "for example through the use of visa regulations, carrier sanctions and concepts such as 'the safe country'." The proliferation of labels and a more restrictive image of the refugee

[46] Since 2002, it is called African Union.
[47] Article 1(2), OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, September 10, 1969.
[48] Cartagena Declaration, adopted by the Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America, Mexico and Panama, November 22, 1984.

were affected by the change in the refugee regime in the last decades. Zetter (2007) argues that, while in the 1970s and 1980s, mass displacements remained mostly in the South and NGOs have contributed to creating a humanitarian image of refugees, the geographical expansion of refugees' displacement and the mixed causes of migration flows have more recently fostered a proliferation of labels for refugees by government bureaucracies, "which at best nuance interpretation, at worst discriminate and detach claimants from the core attribute of being a refugee – international protection" (Ibid., p. 176).[49]

With the acceleration of the securitization of migration in Europe since the early 1990s, there was a return to a mixture in the management of refugees and migrants, although not institutionalized. The UNHCR, for example, trains border guards and helps to build removal centers (Scheel and Ratfisch, 2014). Since then, there has been a multiplication of labels related to forced migration and the consolidation of more restrictive interpretations of who a refugee must be.[50] As Zetter (Ibid., p. 181) states, the creation of bureaucratic procedures served "to prevent access to the label 'refugee'," with forms of temporary protection that "keep the vast majority of refugee claimants in a transient state, often for years." Refugee status has become a rare outcome, reserved only for those "genuine" refugees, who deserve the label; more often they remain asylum seekers, also with gradations of assessment criteria and much more limited rights (Ibid.).[51] El-Enany (2007, p. 4) analyzes how there has been "a terminological and ideational shift" from the use of

[49] The majority of refugees continue to be out of Europe. According to the UNHCR, 83% of the world's refugees are still in low- and middle-income countries, and 72% in neighboring countries. The major hosting countries in absolute numbers are Turkey, Colombia, Uganda, Pakistan and Germany. The UNHCR gathers "refugees and Venezuelans" in these figures, not considering all recently displaced Venezuelans as refugees (4,4 million people). The figures refer to displacements until the end of 2021 and exclude Palestinians, "managed" by a specific agency, the UNRWA. Available on: https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html. Last access: March 3, 2023.

[50] Zetter (2007, p. 177) affirms: "Only when Europe became the destination for what were perceived to be unsustainable numbers, or when states 'failed' on western Europe's borders, such as in Bosnia and Kosovo, did different labels start to emerge and become embedded. The response to these spillover effects was the escalation of temporary protection labels, refugee deterrence policies and offshore processing, all embodying notions of the 'other'. Even developed countries far more remote from these conflicts, such as Australia and Canada, adopted similar policies in response to the global migration of refugees from these violent social transformations."

[51] As Scheel and Tazzioli (2022, p. 13-14) analyze, "processes of migrantisation implicated by practices of boundary-making do, in most cases, not operate along a simple binary distinction between 'native' citizens and migrant 'others.' Rather, migrantisation is often a matter of degrees, as related practices and processes of bordering and boundary-making mobilise complex and shifting taxonomies, indexes, categories and classification systems."

refugee to *asylum seeker* in Europe since the 1990s, to highlight how the latter is just a potential refugee, in principle suspicious.[52]

Johnson (2014, p. 56-57) argues that the line demarcating desirable and undesirable migrants has become their mode of entry: so-called "economic migrants" and "asylum seekers" usually take the same paths and use the same mechanisms to achieve their destiny. They can enter regularly or irregularly. For this reason, the paradigm of forced versus voluntary migration is not suitable for taking account of migrants' experiences and the public policies concerning them. She considers that the opposition between regularity and irregularity is the new paradigm since the international regime for migration and asylum has been focusing on border controls, through physical barriers, agencies like Frontex or readmission agreements. But this is not always the case. In the "long summer of migration," for example, Syrian asylum seekers had their refugee status almost automatically recognized when arriving in European states, even if people coming from other countries were also affected by war and political persecution. The same is true for current Ukrainian asylum seekers. That does not mean that they had a regular mode of entry. Although with the possibility of applying for humanitarian visas in some countries, most Syrians and Ukrainians had to travel irregularly, crossing international borders without a visa, and then being recognized as refugees. Regularity, in their case, was not a criterion for deservingness, while it was for people coming from other parts of the world.

Be the paradigm forced versus voluntary or regular versus irregular, a line is always drawn to define those who can adequate to the moral and depoliticized figure of the "authentic" refugee, which usually mixes dimensions such as the degree of choice and regularity but also, and very crucially, forms of racialization of migrants as an existential threat (Velasco, 2014). The idea of an inevitability of displacement is still important to determine the deservingness of another state's protection (Apostolova, 2015; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016).[53] Threatened,

[52] El-Enany (2007) shows how the EU Qualifications Directive (Directive 2011/95/EU) widens the definition of refugees and, in parallel, increases restrictions in the asylum regime that intensify suspicion of asylum seekers.

[53] Holmes and Castañeda (2016, p. 17) affirm: "Immigrants or migrants, as opposed to refugees, tend to be portrayed in popular, political, and academic discourse as economic opportunists, *voluntarily* leaving their home communities in search of a better life. Because they are viewed as having made a free and autonomous *choice* to cross borders, they are often positioned as unworthy of social, economic, and political rights."

refugees *had* to leave, had no other option, and for the same reason cannot go back to the country they left (principle of *non-refoulement*).[54] The Dublin Regulation, for example, is a product of this logic, reinforcing refugees' lack of will, when it determines that the asylum seeker who arrives in the European Union must ask for asylum in the country of arrival: real refugees were forced to leave, so they should not choose where to go; after escaping persecution, they can be distributed anywhere.[55] They cannot have singular aspirations. The same logic applies to bureaucratic measures regulating the geographical distribution and daily routines of asylum seekers in many countries, such as food stamps or strict rules for leaving camps or collective lodging while waiting for asylum procedures.

The proliferation of labels related to migration, with the restrictive interpretation of who a refugee is, has turned out to reserve an idealized image for refugees and foster the illegalization of masses of people in displacement, who become, as Al Jazeera stated in 2015, a nuisance. The status of a refugee has turned out to be "a highly privileged prize which few deserve and most claim illegally" (Zetter, 2007, p. 184). If not collectively recognized, like the refugees escaping from the war in Syria and Ukraine, the regular legal procedure requires that a "well-founded fear" of persecution is individually proved. To be legally recognized as a refugee, an asylum seeker must tell a credible story of persecution, one that fits expectations of suffering and the inevitability of movement. The necessary story for one to be recognized as a refugee is a known story, which makes it easier for others to accept it (Nguyen, 2019). It is a narrative narrowed down to intake questionnaires or interviews, which must be attuned to aspects of deprivation and victimhood.

[54] As Haddad (2008, p. 59) points out, one of the most important legal measures that precede the 1951 Geneva Convention is the British Alien Act of 1905, which required proof of individual political persecution for one to be recognized as a refugee and distinguished from "the impoverished masses who had the potential to arrive in their thousands."

[55] Political decisions often disregard the Dublin Regulation. In just one example, in August 2015, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that Germany would admit Syrian refugees even if they did not claim asylum in the first EU country they entered, suspending the regulation only for nationals of Syria.

2.4
The 'asylum story'…

In the novel *Two Blankets, Three Sheets, a Towel, and a Pillowcase* (2020), Iraqi writer Rodaan Al-Galidi fictionalizes his life in an asylum seekers' center in Amsterdam, waiting for his asylum claim to be analyzed. Some of the stories he tells are the ones invented by asylum seekers in their applications, many times successful because they know what to tell, or have the money to know what to tell. Edhem, for example, was from Jordan but could convince the Immigration Department that he was an Iraqi who spoke with an accent because he lived at the border. He kept asking about Iraq to the narrator, who, as the writer says in the book's foreword, is "someone I've called Samir Karim. This way I can still be the writer, and not the main character" (Al Galidi, 2020, p. 10).[56] The narrator does not question the invention of stories but the way the system is built for adequation to it, even if this means to present a false one. There are the right stories to be told and usually the ones who have money can access them. "Oh, how gentle the Nederlands is for the asylum seeker who can pay. (…) Dump money in the system that is the Nederlands, and the system's humanity keeps on running until you can prove everything," Al-Galidi writes, with usual irony (Ibid., p. 84).

Edhem was given political asylum after two years and three months, while Samir Karim, the novel's main character – as well as Al-Galidi, the writer – spent nine years in a detention center. We understand the opening of the book, in which the narrator states:

> The Netherlands has taught me three things:
> 1. the difference between a granny bike and a ladies' bike,
> 2. that you must be at least as wary of Europe as you are respectful,
> 3. a clever lie is better than the clumsy truth (Ibid., p. 9)

A clever lie is better than the clumsy truth. The truth is always messy, but it needs order to be credible. Asylum seekers' experiences are illegalized and under suspicion until recognized in rigid asylum interviews. If they are refugees as argued,

[56] Al Galidi (2020, p. 10) plays with the fictionalization of his personal story and the implications it may have: "People might ask me if this is my story, to which I will say: no. But if I'm asked if this is also my story, then I will say wholeheartedly: yes." (…) "This book is fiction for the reader who cannot believe it. But for anyone open to it, it is nonfiction. Or no: let this book be nonfiction, so that the world I had to inhabit for all those years will be transformed from fiction into fact."

they must behave properly as expelled subjects with no desire and prove they had no other choice but leave the country. As we will see in chapter 3 through Valeria Luiselli's writings, stories are usually stuttered, clumsy, but the legitimized one is the horror story with material proof. Nevertheless, since proof or evidence of persecution is very often not available through storytelling, the refugee depends on what Woolley (2017, p. 5) calls the "asylum story":

> an idealized version of refugeehood on which the civic incorporation of the asylum seeker depends and which circulates in a narrative economy that sets the terms for the enunciation of refugee experience. Such models of ideal refugeehood, produced by a peculiarly restrictive set of narrative conditions, have material effects which can often mean the difference between life and death for asylum claimants.

As Woolley (2014, p. 12) notes, authenticity is a requirement in the Geneva Convention on Refugees, which bases recognition on a well-founded fear of persecution, making "the credibility of the original asylum narrative pivotal to the juridical structure of the asylum determination process." But if refugees have no documents or any material proof and the asylum process does not bear truth's clumsiness as stuttered stories, it depends less on facts than on convincing an audience with expectations of the proper behavior of refugees (Woolley, 2017 p. 8). Asylum interviews depend on the stability of the narrative to recognize subjects as authentic refugees, on a story that can be narrowed to fit specific questions that shape what can be told and what can be heard. Truth, then, becomes a mode of performance, and the predictable "asylum story" of refugees helps to build their inevitability in the modern international. Woolley notes how stories told by refugees also depend on the interpretation of interviewers or, as framed by Rajaram (2002, p. 248), on a specific "methodology for listening to refugees."

Woolley (2017) uses a short story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as an example of a refusal of the "asylum story." In *The American Embassy* (2009), while waiting in the queue in front of the American Embassy in Lagos, Nigeria, a woman recalls the facts that led her to ask for asylum in the United States. It is the end of the 1990s. Just a few days earlier, her 4-year-old son, Ugonna, had been killed in front of her by three soldiers who were looking for her husband, a journalist working for the pro-democracy newspaper *The New Nigeria*. Staring at the interviewer at the American Embassy, who asks for the details of her story, the woman just says that her son was killed and confirms it when asked if it was by the

government. The woman had been advised not to falter, and to talk about her son in a convincing way: “Make Ugonna real. Cry, but don’t cry too much,” people had told her (Adichie, 2009, epub, page undefined). The interviewer asks for proof. But she does not say anything else.

> She looked at the next window for a moment, at a man in a dark suit who was leaning close to the screen, reverently, as though praying to the visa interviewer behind. And she realized that she would die gladly at the hands of the man in the black hooded shirt or the one with the shiny bald head before she said a word about Ugonna to this interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Ugonna for a visa to safety. (Ibid.)

Truth and visibility had been the cause of all the suffering of the woman’s family. Her husband had denounced the military government for inventing a coup, been arrested for two weeks, and marked in the face. He had a physical scar to prove it. Later, an exiled Nigerian professor says on BBC radio that the journalist deserved an award because “he makes the world know” (Ibid.), turning the story about the years of General Abacha’s dictatorship famous. But making the world know also made him threatened and leave the country. However, nothing of this story is told at the embassy. On request for evidence of her son’s murder by the government, the woman just turns away and leaves the place, giving up the possibility of claiming asylum in the United States.

As the narrator tells the readers the story that is not shared with the interviewer, we realize that it is a model story of persecution that would justify any asylum claim. But her refusal to speak is not only a refusal to conform to the general plot of the asylum request; it is also a refusal to a certain type of performance that would allow her story to be credible. It was not enough to tell the story, she had to perform it properly. Woolley (2017, p. 16) states that, unlike other literary stories concerned with human rights, which reproduce the quests for authenticity and credibility of asylum legal procedures, here the woman’s “defiant act also illuminates the performative aspects of a system which purports to be grounded in empirical truth but in fact operates at the intersection of representation and experience.” While the woman refuses to calculate and shape her narrative to a proper measure adequate to the embassy’s expectations – neither too little nor too much vulnerability – she tells the readers her story, creating a space in which

narrating experience is possible because she is not worried about credibility. So we actually get to know the story, even though she refuses to perform it to the embassy. This is a narrative that does not accept to adequate to the required performance of truth, but which also has the consequence of abdicating the asylum application.

Refusal is a possible reaction to a system of recognition that requires a credible performance by refugees.[57] But what is at stake for refugees when just refusing recognition? As we will see more closely in chapter 3, the possibilities of escaping representational politics in which refugees have a fixed and proper place are frequently translated into notions of imperceptibility or disidentification. I argue that the focus on the refusal of recognition and the move to imperceptibility runs the risk of reinforcing the figure of the speechless refugee that, as we have seen, shapes political imaginaries. Adichie's short story, for example, is a narrative that deftly points to the violence in the expectations of performance required of asylum seekers. Nevertheless, when the narrator tells readers the story, we still do not know much about her son beyond exactly what she refuses to share with the embassy's interviewer as a "hawk" for a "visa to safety" (Adichie, 2009, epub, page unidentified). Are there other ways of naming that dissent from the "asylum story" without just refusing representation, not reproducing the binary of visibility versus imperceptibility?[58]

2.4.1
…and other stories

Woolley (2017) examines how storytelling can also reinforce the logic of authenticity, exemplifying it with contemporary theatrical productions in Britain

[57] The idea of refusal is a strong one when related to territorial borders. In an ethnography in Canada and the United States, Simpson (2014) shows that, in the face of the relationship between settler colonialism and national borders, for the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, accepting those same borders would be accepting their own elimination as a people. For Indigenous people, then, refusing state's recognition may be the only way of affirming their own existence. Connecting Indigenous people and refugees in Canada through the concept of refugeetude, Nguyen (2019) mentions Coleman's (2016) view that despite the shared "experiences of displacement from a homeland and marginalization in the metropolitan settler state," refugees would have different or even opposite political aims from Indigenous people, desiring state's recognition (Coleman *apud* Nguyen, 2019, p. 126). I suggest that this is a very simplistic opposition, one that disregards the deep differences between Indigenous peoples and refugees. Mohawks not only refuse state's recognition but affirm a specific form of governance to which their people respond to, they have an alternative way of existing as a people that clashes with the territorial borders of the state.

[58] The tension between visibility and invisibility, with the epistemological and political stakes involved in it, is a problem brought up throughout the dissertation.

that recur to testimony in the search for veracity, and opposing them to prose fiction such as Adichie's short story, which would be self-aware of the ethical implications of the representation of refugees. However, self-awareness, although relevant when considering the lives of vulnerable people, does not guarantee that familiar categories are challenged instead of being reproduced, nor fiction is *per se* a better way of accounting for refugees' experiences. Rancière argues that writing history and writing stories belong to a common regime of truth: "testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning" (2004, p. 37). That does not mean, as it is commonly misunderstood, that everything is fictional and there are no differences between reality and unreality. It means that the border between the logic of facts and the logic of stories is blurred. It is blurred not in what is real or not, but in how facts are presented and made intelligible. The indistinction, then, lies in the "narrative arrangements" used either in fiction or in the "description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world" (Ibid.).

According to Rancière, in the Aristotelian representative regime of art, facts and fiction had a clear separation: what empirically happened (History) and what could happen (stories). Representation meant "the existence of necessary connections between a type of subject matter and a form of expression" (Ibid., p. 53): fiction should follow a hierarchy of themes to be represented, in a stable relationship between what is shown and what is meant. In contrast, in the aesthetic regime of art, stories are not led by the need to create an orderly fictional world in opposition to a disorderly empirical world, but by modes of arranging the signs of language in which showing and meaning do not always fit (Rancière, 2004, 2009).[59] In this case, stories are "a way of assigning meaning to the empirical world of 'lowly actions' and commonplace objects" (Rancière, 2004, p. 36) and they do not follow rigid conditions of hierarchical necessity. Everything in the world has in principle the same possibility to be represented and have meaning, without a necessary correspondence between form and content. Therefore, there are no unrepresentable themes because there is no conditionality between what is shown and meant, but different ways of relating and arranging these dimensions.

[59] This does not mean that there is a complete jump from one regime to another and a total disappearance of the representative regime of art, but that historical conditions allowed for new modes of relationship between the rationality of facts and the rationality of fiction that constitutes the aesthetic regime. (Ibid., p. 50)

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to highlight that this does not mean the refusal of the production of similitudes, but actually a multiplication of possibilities of representation. The aesthetic regime

> […] expresses the absence of a stable relationship between exhibition and signification. But *this maladjustment tends towards more representation, not less: more possibilities for constructing equivalences, for rendering what is absent present*, and for making a particular adjustment of the relationship between sense and non-sense coincide with a particular adjustment of the relationship between presentation and revocation. (Rancière, 2007, p. 137, my emphasis)

The political value in texts and images lies in the possibility that their "narrative arrangements" frame the world in ways that dissent from the existing order (Rancière, 2004, 2007, 2008). They do not present a different politics if they do not reimagine the "distribution of the sensible" – or, as it is originally in French, *le partage du sensible*, which means both sharing, taking part in a common, and a division of places within that common, which determines what is visible and said and, importantly, the spatial and temporal conditions for being visible or being able to say. Following this concept, and as pointed out in the introduction, the political dimension of the texts and films analyzed in this dissertation, is not merely in their subject matter, which is clearly of political concern, nor in the fact that they bring awareness to vulnerable lives. As mentioned in chapter 1, their politics of aesthetics lies in their dissensual readings of signs in places, bodies and modes of relationship; in how what is said does not fit with what is shown; in the different temporalities and rhythms that are brought up together, recombining the action and feelings of characters, which do not always coincide; in a tension between the historical time they are inscribed in, attached to the plot, the action, and non-linear and therefore less straight-forward narratable sensations of ordinary life.[60] In short, they promote an "aesthetic separation" (Rancière, 2008), which, as framed by Opondo and Shapiro (2020, p. 226), is an interruption of "the order that seeks to assign bodies, borders, and things a fixed or specific function or destination according to the dominant regime of intelligibility." This order ascribes the place of out-of-placeness to certain bodies, who are already represented as the ones who do not belong. In

[60] Conde (2017, p. 22-24) highlights that for Rancière, the aesthetic regime of arts works in modern fiction by combining the temporality of the plot, of an orderly sequence of actions, and the disordered time of lived moments.

this sense, they are already recognized and figured as strangers, they are not those who we do not know; we already know them through forms of representation, categories of knowledge (Ahmed, 2000). Challenging the recognition of otherness, then, should be done through the own mechanisms of recognition/representation, and not through as an impossible escape from them.

The "other stories" in this dissertation divert from the asylum story in different ways, as the following chapters will show. I hope that some of the aesthetic separations they nurture can crumple the category of the refugee, show its contradictions and ambivalences, speculate new configurations for who a refugee might be in contemporary times, and even question if it still makes sense to keep the category in place. Consequently, they might help to reconfigure ways of political belonging that are still attached to the ideal of citizenship as the proper way of achieving humanity. Instead of destabilizing what a citizen is, departing from refugees can be a path to circumvent the "national order of things" (Malkki, 1995) or "seeing like a state" (Scott, 1999).

It is not trivial not seeing like a state, and I will probably have failed many times by the end of this dissertation. As I have shown in this chapter, modern political theory is founded in the geometrical representation of the world and the *polis* as the natural place of politics, one that tames contingency and guarantees predictability through the law, in a dependency between space and *nomos*, territorial borders and political categories/language. To challenge this regulative ideal, much critical research in the field of International Relations has analyzed practices of control and bordering by the state in the last decades but, as Basaran and Guild (2017, p. 272) state, most of them remained "focused on a particular construction of the subject, the migrant, anchored in statist imaginaries, and tied to particular spaces, movements and legal constructions." Many, I would say, focus more on the relationship between citizenship and humanity than on the relationship between man and world, which, this chapter has argued, is fundamental to the attachment to citizenship as the condition to achieving humanity.

If the modern split between man and world privileges internalizations, subjects separated from objects out there to be apprehended, how can we, instead, think about subjectivities as permanently in the making as relationalities, and which are the effects for politics? Haraway (1991) proposes a conversation between situated knowledges and partial connections, "the joining of partial views and

halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of views from somewhere" (Ibid., p. 196). The privilege of partiality and knowledges on the ground is not any guarantee of a "better" knowledge; it is the possibility of nurturing associative knowledges that come in conversations in everyday lives. Concerned with knowledge production and building on Haraway, Shaw (2003) also stresses that situated knowledges are not exempt from being misleading. Since "no subject, or situation, is adequate as a site through which to know the world" (Ibid., p. 217), one should pay attention to the encounters between these knowledges.

This dissertation aims to find "partial views and halting voices" through encounters with texts and films that show, in their turn, encounters between refugees and non-refugees. In this sense, the work does not intend to remain circumscribed to criticizing common representations of refugees, but to privilege instabilities of naming. If modern sovereignty – not necessarily state sovereignty but acts of authorization – is sovereignty in a world of name, it invents political subjectivity by definition, one that offers a split solution to the human-citizen problem. But if names of things that affect us have inconstant significations and there is a vacuum of language in the impossibility of knowing all the consequences of names through their definitions, there might be a possibility for translating encounters in ways to create dissident worlds instead of reproducing the consensus order of the world. That requires another relationship between subjects and a world that is supposedly out there to be captured and known and a language open to ambivalences, which privileges voices and not authoritative utterances (Das, 2007); a language that has inconstant meanings despite all the work of definitions. People's passions, unlike geometry, remain.

Narratives do not offer a transcendental way out of categories. As I hope it is clear by the end of this chapter, to think about subjectivity is not to think about the subject outside categories, but to look to ways in which subjects can also inhabit language's ambivalence. If classifications make up people, they are also transformed by them: "names interact with the named" (Hacking, 2006). I suggest that the consensus of the asylum story is neither challenged by the total focus on the oppression nor by its complete erasure, but in exploring the tensions between subjection and subjectification. I aim to show these tensions in texts and films that are both inscribed in the time we live in, so one can read in them a crucial

contemporary political issue, but that also bring some dissensus into this time, retaining "that which resists signification" (Rancière, 2004, p. 63). They refer to a contemporary world and, in one way or another, have a representative dimension that corresponds to a given distribution of the sensible. But they also rearrange places and futures for refugees different from the ones glued to the "asylum story." I have chosen works that are in great part legible and draw upon recent events regarding migration/refugeeness, even in fiction. They are works that do not radically challenge established narrative forms, maybe because our times and the themes represented require not to entirely abandon the plot. At the same time, as pointed out in chapter 1, they also bring some estrangement to this legibility. They "build another time into the time of domination" (Rancière, 2014, p. 220, my translation).

The dissertation privileges the tension between language's transparency and opacity, of exposing and resisting signification.[61] Rancière (2004) analyzes the concept of utopia, useful here to better explain the idea of resisting signification. He affirms that utopia means both the search for the dissolution of an existing order, leaving it open for new possibilities, but also replacing this order for another, the "proper" one, in which there is a good or right correspondence between subjects' places and meanings in a community. This leads to a "state of affairs that would therefore abolish the dispute concerning *the relations of words to things that makes up the heart of politics*" (Ibid., p. 40, my emphasis). This dissertation is not utopian in the sense that it does not choose the "right" stories, which offer the best understanding of who a refugee is, but some that might help us rethink what it can mean to talk about refugeeness and political belonging in a world where borders disappear, proliferate and are every day transgressed, displaced and replaced. Refugees struggle not only against the material conditions of modern states and the international system of states but also against these categories through which the system reproduces itself. But they also explore categories' contradictions (Zetter, 2007, p. 186), work tactically with them, and some see and narrate themselves exactly as refugees, who share "the same predictable, fucked-up plot" (Luiselli,

[61] Rancière (2004, p. 54) is against the idea of intransitivity of literature, which would only concern language and not telling a story: "the language of literature can be as transparent as the language of communication. What functions differently is the relationship between saying and meaning".

2017). *Refugee* is not always a word they want to get rid of, but one whose meanings are, despite all the odds, not stable.

The image of the suffering refugee, the speechless passive victim, has fostered discourses that, in a move to highlight refugees' humanity, have defended a supposed universalization that depoliticizes and de-historicizes their lives. The refugee as the "man" opposed to the citizen, as framed by Agamben (1995), for example, confronts a qualified citizen to an empty form, to a non-excessive figure whose clumsiness cannot appear in stories. As Rajaram (2002, p. 251) affirms, "[t]he 'speechlessness' of refugees reinforces the state-centric political imagination; refugees become a site where certain forms of knowledge are reproduced and justified." If many authors consider anonymity or the "politics of the imperceptible" (Papadopoulos et al., 2008) as a way out of the politics of citizenship, a refusal of practices of categorization, I argue that there are ways of challenging dominant representations without escaping them. These other ways can stretch imaginations but are nevertheless still limited to the possibilities of narrating the world through a language that still guarantees refugees' rights in connection with the political and juridical grammar of the modern international.

Refugees' struggles are frequently "carried out in the languages of liberty, equality, reason, progress, and human rights" (Lowe, 2015, p. 41) because legal mechanisms and state recognition are often their only possibility of survival. This makes it harder to circumvent the common representation of refugees, as it is going to be clearer in the next chapter. The challenge, as Smith (2021, p. xvi) points out in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, is "how to break away from categories that slice and box up complex realities while at the same time we do not end up 'blunting the edge of the only knife we have' to communicate our experiences of violence'." Is it possible to craft ways to approach the unfamiliarity of lives without turning it into a categorizable otherness, to name those unprivileged and highly categorized people without just reinforcing bordering practices, imagining political subjects whose singularity of lives is preserved under the *refugee* form? This is a task that will always have a degree of failure but that aims not to run away from a category with which people who are named refugees or asylum seekers keep having to deal in their daily lives. *Unmaking* refugeeness, in this sense, turns out to be more complex than just completely disregarding the name refugee, even though we might conclude that the category nowadays says very little about the experience of the

people it refers to. That entails a different conception of resistance, one that recognizes that negotiations with categories can say more about agency than just a refusal. Stories of resistance, other asylum stories, are not only the ones against the statist practices of bordering, not only the ones that tear walls down, but many times the ones that bring seesaws to walls' cracks.

3
A plastic bow and arrow, a pink hat, and a black hat: shuffled stories and the limits of 'imperceptible politics'

Upon my return to the US, he
asks my occupation. Teacher.

What do you teach?
Poetry.

I hate poetry, the officer says,
I only like writing
where you can make an argument.

Anything he asks, I must answer.
This, too, he likes.

I don't tell him
he will be in a poem
where the argument will be

anti-American.

I place him here, puffy,
pink, ringed in plexi, pleased

with his own wit
and spittle. Saving the argument
I am let in

I am let in until
(Solmaz Sharif, *He, Too*)

In the federal immigration court in New York City, a seven-year-old girl from a small village in Guatemala answers questions in Spanish, asked by a woman she has never seen before. It is not the child's mother tongue, but she speaks it well, unlike her five-year-old sister, who colors a book next to her during the interview.

"Why did you come to the United States?
I don't know.
How did you travel here?

A man brought us.
A coyote?
No, a man.
Was he nice to you?
Yes, he was nice, I think.
And where did you cross the border?
I don't know.
Texas? Arizona?
Yes! Texas Arizona."
(Luiselli, 2017, p. 55)

These are some of the 40 questions asked in court for every child migrant arriving alone in the United States, usually to meet relatives who are already there, and some of the (im)possible answers: a man cannot be a coyote, Texas is in Arizona. The children come mostly from the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) after traveling thousands of kilometers on foot or by bus, traveling Mexico on the roof of the train *La Bestia*[62] and then walking across the territorial border with the U.S., surrendering to the Border Patrol and being detained in a center locally known as icebox, *hielera*, because of its freezing temperatures. It is the same intake questionnaire for every minor, no matter how much they are able to understand it, no matter how old they are, where they come from. The questionnaire is the point of departure for *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, in which writer Valeria Luiselli unites stories she listened to as a volunteer interpreter from Spanish to English in New York's immigration court in 2015. Due to the growth of arrivals of unaccompanied children in the U.S., President Barack Obama's administration had created a priority juvenile docket the year before, reducing the maximum time to find legal representation from 12 months to only 21 days. The short period of time made it harder for families to find pro bono lawyers who would defend their cases, since most of them do not have the means to pay for legal defense. After the priority docket, children's deportation rates have strongly increased. Despite its narrow form, the legal questionnaire was a way to quickly try to frame a story to justify children's protection in the country.

When Luiselli started working as an interpreter, she had recently returned from a road trip from New York to Arizona, near the U.S.-Mexico Border, and

[62] The freight train goes from Chiapas, in the south of Mexico, close to the border of Guatemala, to the outskirts of Mexico City. It is known as *La Bestia* (The Beast) or *Tren de la Muerte* (The Death Train) because migrants risk their lives traveling on its roof for free to cross Mexico, arriving closer to the U.S. border.

incorporated it into the essay, published in 2017. Waiting for their green cards, Luiselli and her husband (both Mexican writers working in the United States), her ten-year-old stepson and her five-year-old daughter were "nonresident aliens" wanting to become "resident aliens," Luiselli says, not without irony: "We joked, somewhat frivolously, about the possible definitions of our new, now pending, migratory status. Were we 'pending aliens,' or 'writers seeking status,' or 'alien writers,' or maybe 'pending Mexicans'?" (Ibid., p. 9). But while the green card application is full of absurd and almost laughable questions about communism, polygamy and morality, the interview with unaccompanied children is rougher. "Stories often become generalized, distorted, appear out of focus" (Ibid., p. 10). In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli goes through each one of the 40 questions while exposing the mechanisms of U.S. bureaucracy and its implication in migration causes; telling the stories of children, migrants and her own; and, most importantly, questioning the possibility of approaching those stories in a fair tone. One feels her effort, during the essay, to avoid the same distortion and generalization nurtured by the intake questionnaire.

After writing an acclaimed essay, Luiselli turned to fiction to dive deeper into the theme. In 2019, she published *Lost Children Archive*, a novel also inspired by her involvement with child migrants and that also incorporates the road trip into the narrative. In the fictional text, a woman narrates a journey with her husband and their children from New York to Arizona, where the couple will work on different sound documentaries. He will start an "inventory of echoes" of the last free Apaches in the United States, while she wants to do a project from the perspective of the children involved in the "crisis at the border."[63] This is what she calls the high rates of detention and deportation of unaccompanied migrant children. But the narrator doesn't really know how to craft a project like this, and the core of the book is exactly the not knowing and the searching for a proper format. How can those

[63] Since Luiselli wrote her books, the "crisis at the border," or the crisis of the United States migration regime, has acquired new configurations. Besides the continuing detention of unaccompanied migrant children, Donald Trump's administration (2017-2020) faced the scandal of the separation of thousands of children from their parents at the border, in a "zero-tolerance" policy for unauthorized crossings. Many families are still not reunited. In March 2020, U.S. Customs and the Border Patrol started to immediately expel undocumented migrants arriving at the border under Title 42. It refers to a law from 1944 created to avoid the spread of influenza and is now used to justify the contention of Covid at the border. Joe Biden's administration, which started in January 2021, created a Family Reunification Task Force but maintained a harsh policy at the border. Biden defended Title 42 for almost two years. It was supposed to end in December 2022, but the Supreme Court voted for its maintenance.

children be known differently from the bureaucratic framing she criticized in *Tell Me How It Ends*? While they head South, she reflects on the impossibility of knowing those children, and the project acquires its shape.

A big part of the novel is a detailed reflexive rehearsal of how to write a story in which child migrants are not reduced to legal categories and the subject of migration is not a reproduction of institutional and media's restricted narratives. The narrator's long and permanent self-reflection, though, exposes how hard it is to escape those restrictions. As the essay points out, "[e]ach child comes from a different place, a separate life, a distinct set of experiences, but their stories usually follow the same predictable, fucked-up plot" (Ibid., p. 51). Writing after being a translator in a federal immigration court, Luiselli knows that the chance of children staying in the U.S. is through a legal fitting. The ones who deserve protection are *refugees*, not *immigrants*, she affirms in *Tell Me How It Ends*. The opposition, although made to defend the right of those who enter, reinforces a logic of inclusion-exclusion of citizenship, which hierarchizes migration and, in distinguishing some, prevents others to move.

Both essay and novel are mainly concerned with the representation of migrants and how silence, echoes and imagination are needed in order not to freeze stories of unprivileged and highly categorized, therefore overly represented people. Both reaffirm the need to tell the stories repeatedly, trying to grasp something of the excess of lives under the category of *immigrants* or *refugees*. Categories are practices that make us reiterate what is familiar, what we are already used to seeing. Luiselli's works show that it is easier to point to the insufficiency of familiar categories, such as refugees and immigrants, than to approach what is unfamiliar since it is precisely what is not visible to us. The writer – and, in the novel, her auto-fictional narrator – sets the difficult and not always achievable task of embracing unfamiliarity without fading it into generalization or, maybe worse, just reproducing the usual asylum story's plot.

This chapter goes through both works of Valeria Luiselli to show the tensions regarding the category of refugee, which is at the same time an oppressive one, as we have seen in the previous chapter, and might also be a category with which people have to negotiate to survive in a modern international system still regulated by a politics of citizenship. Luiselli's works highlight the insufficiency of media and legal representations of child migrants who arrive unaccompanied in the

United States, bounded by common experiences but with singular ways of being in the world, but they also reveal the difficulties in escaping these representations. What happens when children don't have any material proof of persecution, or when they don't have the words to tell or to invent a narrative that fits legal requirements? Is it possible to tell their stories if they are stuttered and not "a round and convincing story that successfully inserts them into legal proceedings working up to their defense" (Luiselli, 2017, p. 66)?

Unlike the other chapters, this one does not introduce what comes in each section. I follow both essay and novel in their ways of pointing to and trying to solve the restriction of categories/stories and the tension between shuffled stories and the proper "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017). By the end of the chapter, I then recall the move I made, which I hope starts to speculate if and how it is possible to name experiences of migration/refugeeness without reinforcing bordering practices and to circumvent the lines of a politics of citizenship without disregarding asylum rights on which many people depend to survive.

3.1
'The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered'

Already in the second paragraph of the essay *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli points to the difficulty of listening to and making sense of the stories she translates in the immigration court:

> I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex narratives. They are delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear. I have to transform them into written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms. The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end. (Ibid., p. 7).

Young children, still learning to express themselves about basic things in daily life, are asked by strangers about a dangerous journey they did unaccompanied and for which they probably don't clearly understand the reasons. When interviewed in immigration courts in the U.S., their relatives are in principle not allowed to help them answer the questions. In the end, there is no "round and convincing story that successfully inserts them into legal proceedings working up to their defense" (Ibid., p. 66); no round and convincing story to be added into "a

narrative economy that sets the terms for the enunciation of refugee experience" (Woolley, 2017, p. 5). Even Luiselli and her husband "didn't have a clear answer" why they had gone to the United States. "No one ever does," she says (Luiselli, 2017, p. 9). But the Mexican writers are adults and privileged enough to come out with the right reasons for their green card applications. It is different with unaccompanied children. "We could translate their cases, but couldn't do anything to help them," she affirms, with frustration (Ibid., p. 67).

The two sisters from the village in Guatemala, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, were so young that they could not even memorize their mother's telephone number in the United States, so their grandmother had to sew the ten digits in the collar of their dresses, which they should not take off until having crossed the border with the coyote – who, for the girls, is just a man. In New York's court, they were not able to recall any story of abuse, exploitation, or relationship with gangs in Guatemala. Paradoxically, the translator wanted to hear these kinds of stories because they were the only hope to find a lawyer and avoid deportation. They were the hope to meet the questionnaire's expectations, to adequately perform the "asylum story." Most of what happened to them could be known in the immigration court because the translator asked for an exception so that the girls' mother, who had herself crossed the desert three years earlier, was allowed to participate in the interview. "The girls were so young, and even if they had a story that secured legal intervention in their favor, they didn't know the words necessary to tell it." (Ibid., p. 66) What happens then if one does not have the words to tell it? If they hesitate, stutter, if their thoughts are shattered, shuffled?

It is to this story of the sisters with the stitched dresses that Luiselli's daughter keeps coming back and asking how it ends. And most of the time the writer answers: I don't know.

The author is self-conscious of the impossibility of fully grasping those children's stories, a reflexivity more radically crafted in *Lost Children Archive*, in whose first half the narrator questions how she should tell the stories of children at the border, which words to use, how to frame the narrative, even if it should be a narrative. Meanwhile, the parallel plot, the family road trip, unfolds. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, more than trying to approach the appropriate way to tell stories, Luiselli reiterates the necessity of repeatedly telling them, exactly because she doesn't know how they end. She begins to approach those stories through some

traces, some mumbling and stuttering of the kids, through the lack of complete and coherent answers to such rigid questions. In a review in *The New York Times*, Mengestu (2017) says that "Luiselli's awareness of a story's ability to restrict informs the book's judicious use of these children's lives, as well as its quietly brilliant structure as a series of responses to the questionnaire." Since the stories are always partial and almost whispered by the children, Luiselli doesn't tell us so much about what in fact happened to them, even if she admits the common plot. She chooses to go through the questionnaire and the difficulties of accessing stories but also explores a lot of statistics, media news and analysis, which help the writer expose the bureaucracy and migration policies in the U.S. It is clear, though, that the stories exceed the 40 questions and the series of maps and numbers of border crossings, deaths, detentions, deportations.

> Numbers and maps tell horror stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice – were that even possible – is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. (Ibid., p. 29)

In the essay, though, one "horror story" is narrated with more details: Luiselli's first translated interview with an unaccompanied child migrant, which obsesses her. Manu López, a sixteen-year-old, is a boy from Honduras, a *catracho,* from the country's capital, Tegucigalpa. That makes him and the translator "enemies," he says, since she is a *chilanga*, a woman from Mexico City.[64] Like many other children and teenagers, Manu does not have the patience or the confidence to answer the questionnaire. Until questions 34, 35 and 36: Did you ever have trouble with gangs or crime in your home country? Any problems with the government in your home country? If so, what happened? "My government? Write this down in your notebook: they don't do shit for anybody like me, that's the problem" (Ibid., p. 74). Manu tells the interviewer that the drug gangs MS-13 and Barrio 18 were trying to recruit him, threatening to go after him in Tegucigalpa, and he reported the threats to the police. But the police didn't act, and some months

[64] Vila (2000) analyzes how systems of identity/categorization are set not only between different nationalities but also regionally inside Mexico. *Chilango*, for example, is also used by Mexicans from Ciudad Juárez to stigmatize people from Mexico City, who occupy a central place in narratives about "those who come from the South" and, according to many of the authors' interviewees, would be mostly responsible for Mexico's social problems (Ibid., p. 10).

later a member of Barrio 18 shot Manu's friend in front of him. That's when he decided to leave and called his aunt in Hempstead, New York, to pay a coyote for $4,000. "In the interview, Manu repeated twice that he wasn't at his friend's funeral. He didn't leave the house until the coyote knocked on his door and they slipped down streets of Tegucigalpa together" (Ibid., p. 75).

Differently from many other children who had taken the same path – a bus to Guatemala, the train *La Bestia*, walking in the Mexican desert, surrendering to the U.S. Border Patrol, being stuck in a detention center and luckily being sent to where their relatives are – Manu arrived in the United States with what would be considered a material proof of his story: a copy of the police report against the gang in Honduras. The piece of paper is fundamental for lawyers to accept the case. "With that kind of material evidence, it would be impossible for them to lose" (Ibid., p. 80), affirms the writer, who is asked to translate the following interviews with Manu, preceding the defense. In one of the meetings, the translator finds out, looking at his broken teeth, that members of Barrio-18 had beaten him up. Not in Honduras, but in Hempstead, almost 6,000 kilometers away. "Hempstead is a shithole full of pandilleros,[65] just like Tegucigalpa," he says (Ibid., p. 83).

Manu's story leads Luiselli to contextualize the intricate relationship between the United States and the Northern Triangle, so intimate that it puts both Hempstead and Tegucigalpa "on the same map. The map of violence related to drug trafficking" (Ibid.). The relationship is concretely evident in Manu's emblematic trajectory. He crosses territorial borders but still finds problems connected to factions of the same drug gangs that have threatened him in Honduras. Luiselli shows how the countries' histories are interconnected and constitute a transnational problem. They are not national issues regarding Mexico, Honduras or Guatemala, to be exclusively solved by them, as usually portrayed in the media. The "drug war" is "a hemispheric war," Luiselli repeats many times, and also in *Lost Children Archive*. Consequently, the children who arrive fleeing from gang violence are also a U.S. concern, she defends.

The writer details Manu's story to highlight the risks of children in their countries of origin and the absurdity of territorial and bureaucratic paths they need to take in order to have the right to protection. Luiselli wants to call attention to the

[65] This is what members of gangs are called in many countries in Latin America.

seriousness of the issue, whose causes and effects have the participation of the United States and should bind the country to hospitality. In order to defend the right to protection, instead of telling a stuttered story, she chooses one that fits the 40 questions' expectations, fits the "asylum story" both in its narrative and the material proof of persecution. This seriousness is then translated into the category *refugee*, in opposition to *immigrant*. "The children who cross Mexico and arrive at the U.S. border are not 'immigrants,' not 'illegals,' not merely 'undocumented minors.' Those children are refugees of a war, and, as such they should all have the right to asylum. But not all of them have it" (Ibid., p. 89). Following the legal hierarchy of mobility, Luiselli opposes a refugee to an immigrant; the latter is a word that has a specially bad connotation in the U.S., frequently related to illegality in the media, by politicians and in daily life discourse. Ironically, the official category of protection that is granted to Manu is called *special immigrant juvenile* (SIJ). The writer explains that this status is the first option of lawyers who defend minors in the U.S. because, contrary to asylum, it does not preclude them to return to their home country.

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli defends the right of child migrants to be in the United States. As a translator in a federal immigration court, she knows that the chance of them staying is through a legal fitting, even though their stories, as she reiterates many times, are much more complex than any questionnaire could expose. The point here is not to undermine her activist move, since the legal adequacy to the category of refugee – or special immigrant juvenile, not any kind of immigrant – is what can avoid children's deportation. What is important to highlight is that Luiselli's essay reveals a common tension in critical texts about the theme: the difficulty of framing migration outside states' parameters, of circumventing the lines of a politics of citizenship without threatening the already guaranteed rights that asylum laws offer.

The rigid opposition of *immigrant* and *refugee* may guarantee that some are granted protection, but it also means the exclusion of others, the ones who don't have any "material evidence," like the copy of a police report; the ones who don't have the "correct words" to tell their stories; or the ones who "don't have enough battle wounds to show" (Ibid., p. 61).[66] Or migrants who don't have the financial

[66] "An answer is 'correct' if it strengthens the child's case and provides a potential avenue of relief. So, in the warped world of immigration, a correct answer is when, for example, a girl reveals that

resources to pay a lawyer, to elaborate the "correct answers" expected by bureaucracy. What happens when children don't have any material proof of persecution, or when they don't have the words to tell their story or invent one that fits legal requirements, but nevertheless left home on their own, without any adults, to meet relatives in the U.S.? Is it possible to tell their stories if they are not "a round and convincing story that successfully inserts them into legal proceedings working up to their defense" (Ibid., p. 66)? The distinctiveness of *refugee* as a category is precisely what prevents others to move (Nguyen, 2019). Nevertheless, when one looks closely at experiences of migration, one notes "an epistemological gap between the restrictive UNHCR conceptualization of refugee, which many states depend on to develop policy and establish legality, and the embodied experience of refuge" (Ibid., p. 114). As Nguyen (Ibid., p. 116) states,

> it is difficult to distinguish between refugee subjects and other transnational migrants, diasporic individuals, or forcibly displaced groups. Rather than make legal refugees less unique or obsolete, this definitional imprecision or ambiguity points to a dimension of deep arbitrariness in the system: some individuals escaping political turmoil and forms of violence are deemed refugees and others are just migrants, even when there is much experiential overlap.

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli departs from her experience as a translator in a federal immigration court, so it is no surprise that she deals with a legal framing. But she is also aware, as pointed out earlier, that stories exceed legal categories, and, in view of this excess, she is self-conscious of how hard it is to tell those stories without restricting them. Of how hard it is to frame these children as singular children connected by common experiences, with experiential overlap, but also particular stories and ways of being in the world. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli doesn't approach most of the stories that don't have a fitting to the legal categories because they are shuffled, even though she exposes her discomfort with not finding the proper words for the children. In *Lost Children Archive*, the narrator starts

her father is an alcoholic who physically or sexually abused her, or when a boy reports that he received death threats or that he was beaten repeatedly by several gang members after refusing to acquiesce to recruitment at school and has the physical injuries to prove it. Such answers – more common than exceptional – may open doors to potential immigration relief and, eventually, legal status in the United States. When children don't have enough battle wounds to show, they may not have any way to successfully defend their cases and will most likely be 'removed' back to their home country, often without a trial." (Luiselli, 2017, p. 61)

crafting other possible definitions of refugee children that are not attached to the law, highlighting a temporal dimension. It is a dimension that connects, for example, someone who is a special immigrant juvenile and a refugee, even if they have different official statuses. She highlights an "enduring quality" of refugee subjects' experiences, as pointed out by Nguyen (Ibid., p. 110).[67]

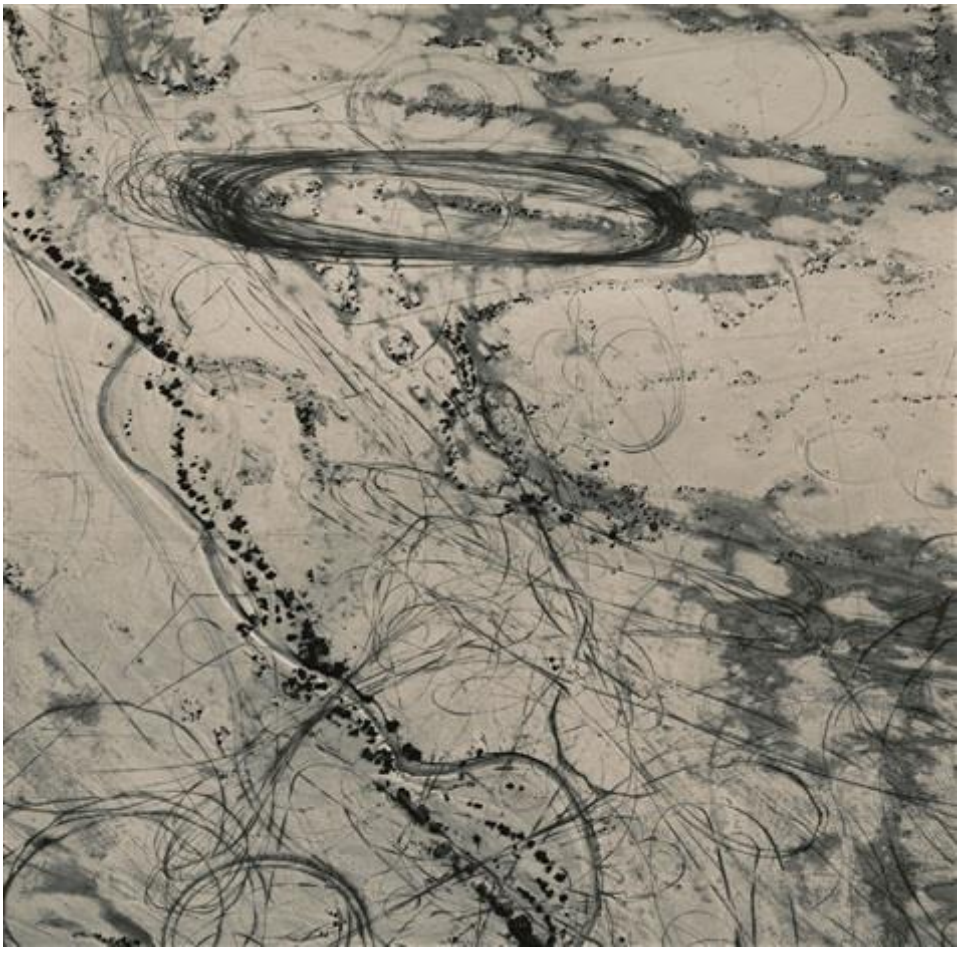
> What does "refugee" mean, Mama? the girl asks from the backseat.
> I look for possible answers to give her. I suppose that someone who is fleeing is still not a refugee. A refugee is someone who has already arrived somewhere, in a foreign land, but must wait for an indefinite time before actually, fully having arrived. Refugees wait in detention centers, shelters, or camps; in federal custody and under the gaze of armed officials. They wait in long lines for lunch, for a bed to sleep in, wait with their hands raised to ask if they can use the bathroom. They wait to be let out, wait for a telephone call, for someone to claim or pick them up. And then there are refugees who are lucky enough to be finally reunited with their families, living in a new home. But even those still wait. They wait for the court's notice to appear, for a court ruling, for either deportation or asylum, wait to know where they will end up living and under what conditions. They wait for a school to admit them, for a job opening, for a doctor to see them. They wait for visas, documents, permission. They wait for a cue, for instructions, and then wait some more. They wait for their dignity to be restored.
> What does it mean to be a refugee? I suppose I could tell the girl:
> A child refugee is someone who waits.
> But instead, I tell her that a refugee is someone who has to find a new home. (Luiselli, 2019, p. 47-48).

Luiselli tries to find some commonality between subjects without resorting to legal parameters. Aware of the epistemological gap between definition and experience, she realizes that refugeeness can have effects after someone has been granted asylum. Nguyen (2019) analyzes how people can feel like a refugee way before legally becoming one so that, differently from what the narrator says, people fleeing are already refugees. They can be refugees even before arriving in the country of immigration, actually even before fleeing, and still feel it long after they acquired citizenship. In this sense, refugee is a form of subjectivity not glued to asylum procedures or the crossing of territorial borders and can affect generations to come, which does not mean that it is an essential or inherent condition that will

[67] There are different ways of approaching experiences of migration in order to highlight their commonalities without turning them equal. As we will see in chapter 5, Fassin (2018) unites refugees, asylum seekers, and documented and undocumented migrants under a form of life he calls "transnational precarious nomads." This means that migrants with singular experiences are bounded by shared understandings of the world, which he relates to precarity but also with a sense of provisionality. Legal categories are important but also blurred by migrants in the performativity of their daily lives.

always stick to subjects. Nguyen proposes to think about a politics of *refugeetude*, which "names the forms of recognition, articulation, and relation that emerge from the experience of refuge(e), as well as the attempts to redefine and live it differently from what the legal framework – as contemporary arbiter of refugee lives – allows" (Ibid., p.110).

3.2
'What I see is what others have already documented'



Off-Road Traffic Pattern along the Northwest Shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah (1988), by Emmet Gowin

The epistemological questioning of classifying and narrating the world appears throughout *Lost Children Archive*, in which the narrator, an unnamed woman, reflects on archive, documentation and classification. It is a novel now, not a non-fictional essay anymore, but the fictional characters nurture from the writer's

experiences. The novel's narrator is an unnamed woman, traveling by car with her unnamed husband and their unnamed children from New York to southeast Arizona. The children are her daughter and her husband's son, both from previous relationships. Considering that "there has always been an anxiety around each one's place in the family" (Luiselli, 2019, p. 8), it is just simpler to call them "our children," or "the boy" and "the girl"; as it is for the children to call the girl's mother and the boy's father Mama and Papa, or just Ma and Pa. "And until now at least, our family lexicon defined the scope and limits of our shared world" (Ibid., p. 6), the narrator says.

The "family lexicon," "family plot" and the "covalence"[68] between their members permeate the beginning of the novel, slowly indicating the weight, which runs throughout the whole book, of the epistemological question about how to tell stories and the roles characters have on them according to how one frames and names them. New families are like young nations, with their own foundational myths, the narrator suggests. Making sense of how the family was formed, she tells that she and her husband met earlier working on a soundscape project. Their task was to record different languages in New York City, where there are over 800, mapping and collecting voices and accents for four years. "We accumulated hours of tape of people speaking, telling stories, pausing, telling lies, praying, hesitating, confessing, breathing" (Ibid., p. 13). Most of the stories cannot be understood, because they are foreign languages to the interviewers, but nevertheless have a material effect, like "the quick tongue-slaps against the palate in all the polysyllabic Kichwa and Karif words, the soft and downward curved bed of the tongue in the aspirated Arabic h" (Ibid.). Foreign languages leave traces through sounds and also through silences.

After meeting Manuela, a woman from Mixteca, Mexico, whose first language is Trique, the narrator asks to record her speaking. In return, she translates the documents of Manuelas' daughters from Spanish to English. The girls had just crossed the border and were held in a detention center for unaccompanied minors in Texas. Here the story of the stitched dresses reappears, with the telephone number sewn by their grandmother. But unlike the essay, in the novel the girls are

[68] These are examples of the titles of sessions of *Lost Children Archive*, many of them with references to narrative and language. Others are named, for example, "Inventory," "Mother Tongues," "Pronouns," "Histories" and "Beginnings."

Mexican and detained by a Border Patrol officer. The narrator accompanies Manuela to a meeting with a lawyer, but the case was not "strong enough" to be taken. That is how, in the novel, the character gets involved with the issue of undocumented children who arrive alone from Mexico and the Northern Triangle and later obtains funding to tell the story "from the perspective of the children involved in it," which is a neglected perspective, as *Tell Me How It Ends* had already pointed out. Since her husband was beginning a sound project about the last Apache leaders, they both head to the south of the United States with their children. He would work on an "inventory of echoes" of the former Apaches and she would make a sound documentary about children arriving and detained at the border.

As they approach South, the landscape changes, signs like *Gun Show This Weekend!* and *Adultery is a Sin* appear on the roads, and the family starts feeling prejudice because of their foreign semblance. They hear more frequently news and comments about the arrival of foreign children, who are called *refugees*, *alien kids*, or *immigrants*, depending on how the stories are told and who tells them. Whenever they hear news about the "crisis at the border" on the radio or comments about it, their own children start questioning what refugees are. That's when Mama thinks about the temporal dimension of being a refugee: "someone who waits" (Ibid., p. 48). In the family lexicon, refugees are then defined as "lost children." Later in the road trip, when the narrator acknowledges that Manuela's daughters disappeared, lost children become concrete. They acquire a central role in the family's journey and in the story the narrator is searching for her sound documentary.

In parallel, the character's doubts about how to approach these stories are intensified. She exposes her ethical, aesthetic, political and pragmatic concerns: with the utility of a radio documentary about the theme, the overexposure of these children's suffering and their misrepresentation, her (non-)authority to talk about refugee subjects (Ibid., p. 78-79). Formed as a political journalist, and used to narrate oral stories coherently, the woman starts questioning her usual work methods. She is a *documentarian*, concerned with "pragmatic storytelling" (Ibid., p. 99); her husband, on the other hand, is a *documentarist*, someone less worried with narratives' coherence than with what sounds can evoke, more interested in an accumulation of details than with an ordered whole.

In the first part of the book, the narrator is continuously reflecting on this (un)balance between being either a documentarian or documentarist, between

inventory and narrative, and if she should be more like her husband: "maybe everything will remain unnarrated, a collage of environments and voices telling the story on their own, instead of a single voice forcing it all together into a clean narrative sequence" (Ibid., p. 95). But the author, who has a Ph.D. in Literature and brings many artistic and academic references to the novel, lending the persistent intellectual reflexivity to her narrator, knows that it is impossible to just grasp the world as it "is," completely unmediated, even though her character wants to frame stories differently. She is conscious that documenting things won't restore the original experience but create some version of it. "What I see is what others have already documented," (Ibid., p. 102) she says when traveling across the United States, a country that she got to know through photographers like Robert Frank, Robert Adams, Nan Goldin and Larry Clark. The boxes taken by the family in the car's trunk, filled with books, notes, photographs and recordings, have an important place in the novel: they are referent marks in the inventory of things they take and necessarily will be part of what they get back in return. They are the materials that produce echoes once one speaks to them.

The whole discussion on archive, documentation, sound and photography is not marginal, but fundamental during the first half of the book. The narrator slowly prepares the reader for a second part in which the story of the "lost children" will be told. She first questions representation, opening up possibilities of approaching and framing the world and narrating stories. That is done in great part through discussions about the distinct ways of recording sounds and putting them together and the distinct ways a photograph can capture landscapes or people. Choosing the medium is already to start a classification: "[a] camera can capture an entire portion of a landscape in a single impression; but a microphone, even a parabolic one, can sample only fragments and details" (Ibid., p. 54).

Even knowing that she cannot be neutral, the woman wants time to approach things in the world and to be approached by them. Aware of the "story's ability to restrict" (Mengestu, 2017), as already pointed out, the narrator slows down, and the first part of the book reflects this wish. In a *New Yorker*'s review, entitled *Writing about Writing about the Border Crisis*, Wood (2019) highlights how the taking of time serves for the self-consciousness of the character: "The immediacy of the human suffering at the border, the delicacy of how to provide witness – these are good reasons to proceed with skepticism about narrative contrivances. So the novel,

like Emmet Gowin's photographs, takes time rather than quickly imposing a point of view." The photographer Emmet Gowin enters the narrator's reflection when she buys a book with a collection of his pictures in a bookshop during the road trip. She talks about Gowin's work:

> A strange emptiness and boredom is why I like his documentation of people and landscapes. I read somewhere, probably in a wall text in a museum, that he used to say that in landscape photography, both the heart and the mind need time to find their proper place. (…) I still liked him more than Robert Frank, Kerouac, and everyone else who has attempted to understand this landscape – perhaps because he takes his time looking at things instead of imposing a point of view on them. He looks at people, forgotten and wild, lets them come forth into the camera with all their lust, frustration, and desperation, their crookedness and innocence. He also looks at landscapes, man-made and embellished but somehow also abandoned. The landscapes that he photographs become visible more slowly than his family portraits. They are less immediately compelling and much more subtle. They come into focus only after you have held your breath long enough in front of them, like when we're driving through a tunnel and out of superstition everyone in the car holds their breath and then, when we reach the other side, the world opens up in front of us, immense and ungraspable, and there is a single moment of silence, mindful but without thoughts. (Luiselli, 2019, p. 86)

3.3
'Am I also chasing ghosts, like he is?'

Besides reflecting on how she needs to tell "lost children" stories, the novel's narrator also wonders what exactly she is looking for and makes parallels between her search and her husband's, who is collecting sounds related to the Apaches, even though they don't exist anymore. "Am I also chasing ghosts, like he is?" (Ibid., p. 140), she asks herself, in the cemetery in Oklahoma where three hundred Chiricahua Apaches are buried. The Apache Prisoner-of-War Cemeteries is a memorial site where visitors learn the official U.S. version of history: they surrendered to the U.S. Army in 1894 and became prisoners of war. Her husband doesn't want to directly oppose this narrative and prove the bravery of Native Americans. He already does that all the time to their children, who, in the car's backseat, listen over and over to how the Apaches were the last free peoples in the continent, Geronimo being the last to surrender. The heroic flavor is also in the books the man takes in his boxes, like "an all-male compendium of 'going on a journey,' conquering and colonizing," observes his wife (Ibid., p. 42). His soundscape project is much more abstract. Once in the cemetery, he records the sounds of insects, birds, the wind. "He's somehow trying to capture their past

presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them" (Ibid., p. 141). Even though the narrator doesn't know how one can collect echoes of ghosts, sounds of things that are not there, she decides to develop "a document that registers the soundmarks, traces, and echoes that lost children leave behind" (Ibid., p. 144).

> The story I have to record is not the story of children who arrive, those who finally make it to their destinations and can tell their own story. The story I need to document is not that of the children in immigration courts, as I once thought. The media is doing that already (…). I am still not sure how I'll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I'm also chasing ghosts and echoes. Except mine are not in history books, and not in cemeteries. Where are they – the lost children? And where are Manuela's two girls? I don't know, but this I do know: if I'm going to find anything, anyone, if I'm going to tell their story, I need to start looking somewhere else. (Ibid., p.146)

The narrator carefully builds her reflections toward the conclusion that she cannot just repeat the stories told in the media and immigration courts. She doesn't want to see them through legal lenses, even if it is clear that she will have to depart from somewhere to echo her search, maybe the materials in the archives inside her boxes, which represent readings of the world. At this point, she doesn't call the children at the borders *refugees* anymore. More and more, they are *the lost children*, in a move to disconnect their stories from the official category. There are the unnamed boy and unnamed girl in the car; there are Manuela's unnamed daughters, who are indeed missing; and there are the lost children, the ones who can't tell their stories, whose words are not heard, whose bodies are not found or were intentionally erased.

Lost people at the border had already been mentioned in the essay *Tell Me How It Ends*, which unites many statistics related to the crossings in the desert: rapes, abductions, disappearances, deaths. One of the references was from 2010, when 72 bodies of Central and South American migrants were found in a mass grave in a ranch in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in the northeast of Mexico, murdered by members of the drug cartel Los Zetas. The case of "Los 72" caused a commotion in Mexico at the time, but nothing really changed. Hundreds of mass graves have been found since then. Together with the growth of deaths and the "moral alibi"

(Doty, 2011) of the desert that has continued to work in favor of people's erasure,[69] the last decade has also seen a growth of memorials to missing and dead migrants in the desert and in border cities.

Auchter (2013) discusses the memorialization of migrants who died or disappeared during their crossings in ways that help us understand the dilemmas of addressing these stories. Auchter's analysis is connected to a wider discussion about representation but more specifically to the forms of representation of unprivileged groups like missing or undocumented dead migrants. She analyzes works of art, gravesites and small cemeteries at the U.S.-Mexico border in order to question the state's mechanisms of representation and forms of resistance to them. The author begins with a reflection on the production of borders as a practice of statecraft, as one of the main mechanisms through which the citizen is forged as the political subject *par excellence*. But, as an ongoing process, which nevertheless works to create the idea of a fixed and natural border, practices of (b)ordering also imply practices of resistance. Opposing the wall in the desert, installed as a territorial marker of state sovereignty, there are memorials with crosses on fences and adjacent roads, mostly on the Mexican side of the border; big sculptures created by artists in the desert; and also the so-called 'John Doe' cemeteries, where unidentified people are buried.

The author calls these sites "counter-memorials," in the sense that they commemorate absence, anonymity, instead of individual and recognizable lives as memorials do. Some of them are in the cemeteries of border cities such as Holtville, California, and Kennedy County, Texas, which have a specific part for indigents, who are mostly undocumented migrants. "Pauper cemeteries" have bricks and aluminum anonymous grave markers, and in some, one can read "unknown male," "unknown skeletal remains," "John Doe" or "Jane Doe"; others have wooden crosses with the words *no olvidado* ("not forgotten"). They strongly contrast with the private part of the cemeteries, with nice grass, flowers and marble graves, which are the proper artifacts for the proper lives to be honored (Ibid., p. 17).

Drawing on Butler's conceptualization of ungrievable lives, Auchter

[69] Doty (2011) analyzes how the desert in the Mexico-U.S. border is a "space of moral alibi" since one can always resort to its dryness and vastness as an inherently high risk if one dares to cross it. Geographic space exempts governors or anyone from responsibility for the deaths.

affirms that the celebration of unidentified bodies of migrants disrupts a division between grievable and ungrievable lives, because it is a commemoration of absence, in contraposition to the logic of naming the ones that are mourned. Remembering unidentified migrants challenges, for example, the tradition of individualizing heroes and victims who served the nation, she argues. In this sense, they are specters that "continue to haunt in the interstices of political space, (…) disrupting the ontological givens and assumptions of subjectivity which the state (re)produces" (Ibid., p. 10). They are specters not only because they can't be identified, but mainly because they disrupt the centrality of identification and ordering in the workings of statecraft. Auchter's argument is that, in celebrating absence, counter-memorials are not trapped in the logic of representation that sustains a politics of citizenship, and for this reason are a form of resistance. Parallel to a movement of visibility, or identity politics, there are, on the other hand, acts of refusal to make visible because the frames through which one is made visible usually reinforce states' practices of bordering.

> Beyond disrupting law and order by crossing in the first place, they are seen as challenging the rule of identification and placement by which we bury our dead as well. Ever since the First World War, the US has privileged identification when it comes to the dead. *The most important thing is to name the individual, then place them in their appropriate context. The undocumented immigrant disrupts this very possibility*. As such, his/her gravesite is never simply a grave, but is rather imbued with the politics of documentality. We can explore documentality beyond simply the idea of documents in their physicality. *For undocumented immigrants, it is not simply their lack of physical papers, but their potential disruption of the social ordering system which involves registering and classifying* (Ibid., p. 19, my emphasis).

Representation is a mechanism of power, a means to order, classify and therefore maintain different social forces under control. Naming and representing reproduce "subject-forms," which beacon the parameters of political inclusion and exclusion attached to modern sovereignty (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). In this sense, drawing a parallel to Auchter's analysis, it is not possible to be buried in the nice grassy cemetery, with all the traditional honors, without falling into the reproduction of "ontological givens and assumptions of subjectivity" (Ibid., p. 6) by the state: the subject-forms worthy of mourning. It is only through the absorption of otherness that national sovereignty, which is "unequal and incomplete by design," can reproduce itself (Ibid.). Political representation orders migration and

frames migrant subjects as others who have the hope to be included as citizens in the future and luckily receive flowers on their graves. One can think here how the contemporary use of the term *refugee* in opposition to *immigrant* serves the logic of inclusion-exclusion, preventing some to move while others can maintain the expectation of future citizenship. The ones who deserve protection are refugees, not immigrants, as Luiselli still affirms in *Tell Me How It Ends*, reproducing otherness that can be incorporated into national sovereignty through a politics of citizenship.

3.3.1
'Figures do not act, but people do'

The relationship between political struggles and representation is a central issue in critical migration studies. In general terms, on the one hand, there is a focus on acts through which migrants make themselves visible and claim rights, or "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2002, 2008), which will be discussed in chapter 5. On the other hand, there is a distrust of migrants' struggles that adapt to states' play of inclusion and exclusion instead of questioning the parameters for inclusion, a view that can be generally identified with the autonomy of migration literature and is discussed in this section. Facing a long history of research that victimizes migrants and refugees as speechless people, both approaches are concerned with privileging their agency: in the first case, by considering them potential subjects of rights, who can make themselves visible; in the second, by giving prerogative to invisibility, to escaping modes of representation that fix them as categories of vulnerable people subject to the discipline of power.

Following authors such as Sharma (2009), Stierl (2017), Tazzioli (2019) and Finiguerra (2023), I consider that the binary of visibility versus invisibility is unproductive for understanding political struggles and migrants' subjectivities. It is not able to engage with the ways in which the oppression of a category such as *refugee* can simultaneously be enabling for specific subjects. Just refusing or praising naming does not respond to how refugees have to deal with categories imposed on them, to how the making and unmaking of refugeeness are dependent on conditions for being seen and for whom one is visible or imperceptible. As *Tell Me How It Ends* shows, the category of the *refugee* violently restricts peoples' ways of living, but this restriction is sometimes the only way for them to survive. Therefore, depending on their experiences, social conditions and perspectives,

people develop different modes of dealing with (in)visibility or, as Papadopoulos et al. (2008) call it, imperceptibility. Their agency, then, cannot be epitomized in the fact of being visible or invisible.[70]

The term *escape* is often used to stress migrant's agency by authors related to the autonomy of migration approach (Mezzadra, 2004, 2015; Andrijasevic et al., 2005; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Martignoni and Papadopoulos, 2017). They argue that, despite the diversity of migrants' subjectivities and struggles, there is an excess in migration that defies the domestication of mobility and reveals the inherent incompleteness of national sovereignty. While movements of escape can and will normally be at some point co-opted by statecraft's normalizing mechanisms, there is a common force to migratory movements as a whole that exceeds mechanisms of control, "an affective and generic gesture of freedom that evades the concrete control of moving people" (Martignoni and Papadopoulos, 2017, p. 39). These authors importantly lend a creative dimension to migratory movements, detaching them from the image of passivity and focusing on their subjective dimension. But they also risk romanticizing these movements when considering migration an autonomous energy that necessarily comes first of any power relations and provokes a reaction in modes of regulation and control, as if it never responded to such power mechanisms.

There are some problems attached to the idea of imperceptibility, of being able to be imperceptible to power, that is attached to the one of escape/autonomy. First, the praise of imperceptibility implies treating migration as inherently progressive, as if it is always a movement of subversion. Second, and relatedly, as Stierl (2017) analyzes, imperceptibility is not intrinsically positive for migrants, not always a choice. It can also be the result of oppressive forms of control. In an ethnographic account of how a family of Yazidi Syrian migrants has moved from Greece to Western Europe, Stierl shows that imperceptibility meant having to hide, and not being free or autonomous, since excess was also found in the violence of border controls. If the family kept moving despite this violence, this "cannot univocally be read as either a failure of the border regime or as the success of

[70] In a recent article, Finiguerra (2023) criticizes the wide range of use of (in)visibility as a conceptual tool in research about migration. The author proposes "the language of *practices of making present* to highlight how perceptibility is both materially situated and comprises both areas of clarity (visibility) and opacity (invisibility)" (Ibid., p. 5, my emphasis).

migration's inventiveness and uncontrollability, but only as c*ontinuous border entanglements*" (Ibid., p. 227, my emphasis). As Stierl states, excess and control should not be seen as a dualism, but "rethought and conceived as intimately and necessarily co-constitutive forces that fold into one another and form border entanglements where excess can be detected in violent border collisions as well as in the will to struggle and move on" (Ibid., p. 212). Sharma (2009) and Tazzioli (2019) also stress the fact that invisibility/imperceptibility is frequently imposed by the conditions in which people are (not) allowed to move and not by their own desire. That difference is crucial, implying different political outcomes. That is why, as Finiguerra (2023, p. 11) argues, instead of the notion of (in)visibility, the process of making oneself (in)visible should be stressed, because it is determinant for migrants' political purposes.

Importantly for the discussion here, the focus on imperceptibility risks generalizing migration and treating migrants as figures (Sharma, 2009). This happens to more or less a degree in the autonomy of migration literature, related to the ontological primacy of escape, but it is more extreme when there is an insistence on totally detaching escape from power. Papadopoulos et al. (2008) intensify the praise of imperceptibility when they defend *outside politics* or *imperceptible politics*, or "everyday cultural and practical practices of escape" (Ibid., p. 73). Because their main opposition is with what they call the double-R axiom (rights and representation) that shapes forms of sovereignty, they insist on the refusal of any modes of naming. It is through naming that state power reacts to autonomous and creative forms of escape and tries to place them in a fixed proper place. Escape, the authors say, are imperceptible moments, everyday practices "which are the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such" (Ibid., p. xii); they are forms of subversion that occupy a space left by the always incomplete project of totalizing sovereignty (Ibid., p. 12-13). Movements of escape, of which migration is an important example, would be a way of avoiding identitarian categories, the politics of representation that frames subjects according to fixed borders, administrating them through practices of *policing* (Ibid., p. 56-57, 68).[71]

[71] In this sense, as Finiguerra (2023, p. 9) notes, "imperceptibility is not the material or practical attempt not to be detected by forms of control (although it might include it) but it is a deeper refusal to be integrated into particular orders and identification practices, including that of collective political subjectivation to articulate right claims."

For the authors, it is possible to escape (and not merely resist) the logics of political representation that orders statecraft's processes of inclusion-exclusion, as for Auchter it is the case with the counter-memorials in the desert.

Papadopoulos et al. (2008) repeat many times that imperceptibility is not the same as invisibility; it is a betrayal, not a negation of representation. Nevertheless, they do not manage to differentiate both conceptually. At the beginning of the book *Escape Routes*, the authors argue that, following Rancière, imperceptibility is "first and foremost a question of deploying a new perceptual strategy" (Ibid., p. xv). Later, they affirm that "[p]olitics is a refusal of representation" (Ibid., p. 70). As we saw in chapter 2, for Rancière, politics as the possibility of rearranging the perceptual field is not the same as an escape from representation. Papadopoulos et al. reject any type of representation when they focus only on materiality and detach it from language. There is a total distrust in the symbolic field, as if it was separated from bodies, as if people would not give meaning to their practices of escape (Sharma, 2009).

Facing the problem of representation that captures subjectivities, Papadopoulos et al. (2008) argue for a process of *dis-identification*, which they mean "literally, as the way to become more than one" (Ibid., p. 217). But how does one become more than one and remain imperceptible? Imperceptible to whom? A few times, the authors state that it is imperceptible for power, or "invisible to those whose sensibility can identify neither excess, nor absence, nor speculative figuration" (Ibid., p. 68). But how do migrants make their "everyday cultural and practical practices of escape" perceptible for them and for the ones they relate to, even if, let's imagine, they manage to be imperceptible for power?[72] In disconnecting naming and bodily experiences, the authors ignore concrete subjects and the meanings they give to their experiences, in "another false dichotomy between subjectivities and material existence" (Sharma, 2009, p. 472). In the obsession to escape from violent forms of naming, they generalize people under

[72] Papadopoulos et al. (2008, p. 69-70) affirm: "Politics arises from the emergence of the miscounted, the imperceptible, those who have no place within the normalising organisation of the social realm. The refusal of representation is a way of introducing the part which is outside of policing, which is not a part of community, which is neither a minority nor intends to be included within the majority. *Outside politics* is the way to escape the controlling and repressive force of contemporary politics (that is of contemporary policing); or else it is a way to change our senses, our habits, our practices in order to experiment together with those who have no part, instead of attempting to include them into the current regime of control." They do not explain, however, how the miscounted can both emerge and remain imperceptible.

categories they reject, such as "guest workers" or "illegal migrants." Sharma (Ibid.) analyzes this generalization:

> The first problem is there for the authors, subjectivities always seem to be subjectifications, that is, all subject positions are effects of power. The second, related, problem, is the lack of importance paid to people's subjectivities. As a result the politics of escape seems to occur without any subjects. Instead, we have figures – in particular, the figure of the 'migrant.' Yet, figures do not act, but people do. And migrants are people who do not necessarily share a common political project, be it 'escape' or something else.

There are many relevant issues thoroughly examined by Papadopoulos et al. (2008), specially how the logic of representation reinforces a repressive policing that keeps people in their proper places/categories. They analyze how the double-R axiom "render[s] the forces partaking in a social conflict visible to the gaze of power" (Ibid., p. 56). The goal here is to complexify how people escape the proper place/category of refugee, negotiate with it and give it meaning, sometimes using this place/category tactically for their own survival, since they have material consequences in people's lives. The critique of a liberal agent that aims for inclusion in the politics of citizenship should not lead to the opposite move that dissolves people as general migrants without looking at their subjectivities. Besides ignoring the entanglements between migration and forms of (border) control, as Stierl (2017) notes, this view moves away from searching possibilities of naming that are ambivalent and not completely inscribed in the logic of citizenship. If imperceptible subjects incorporate "speculative figurations into the practices of escape" (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 67), are these figurations always nameless, disidentified, amorphous energy? Aren't they built in connection to other people, migrants and non-migrants, which give new meanings to "practices of escape"?

When progressively abandoning the term *refugees* and choosing to talk about *lost children*, the narrator of *Lost Children Archive* is searching for disidentification, willing to escape representation, although she still wants to tell their stories. In the whole first part of the novel, she questions media and courts' narratives and Migrant Mortality reports, which reiterate common political representations as analyzed above. For that reason, she hesitates to make children visible or retell stories that were already told. The search for ghosts who are not in the cemeteries is a search for this force that exceeds policing, which is a non-

representable force. She sometimes wonders if they may remain as fragments, unnarrated, an "inventory of echoes" that prevent an immediate and coherent meaning. The main tension of this first part of the book, then, is how to narrate without falling into representation traps. It is not by chance that at the beginning of the road trip, all the pictures the boy takes on his new polaroid camera come out white. Maybe because what he is photographing "is not actually there," the woman says (Luiselli, 2019, p. 55). And it is neither by chance that at the beginning of the novel the narrator mentions an excerpt from Walt Whitman's poem *Leaves of Grass*, relating it to her husband's and her own work of collecting sounds of strangers, of being intimate with them even if just passing by.[73]

> *Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon you,*
> *You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream,)*
> *I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,*
> *All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,*
> *You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,*
> *I ate with you, and slept with you*
> (Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass, apud* Luiselli, 2019, p. 29)

However, resorting to disidentification doesn't tackle how migrants themselves experience the destabilization of categories, subject positions and differential inclusions set up by bordering and citizenship regimes. I take a central question framed by Papadopoulos et al. (2008, p. 217): "What kind of political subject does imperceptibility create?" If escape "is not a ghost, merely a protean trickster" (Ibid., p. 66), what kind of forms may this trickster have and attribute meaning to, even if changeable? How is it possible to narrate the lost children's stories and at the same time maintain them lost in some way? Is it through the fragment, the loose connectivity? Is a celebration of anonymity, of absence, possible? Can we name like a seesaw crossing the cracks of a wall, keeping the wall

[73] The narrator relates the poem to the strangers she and her husband met in their sound project in New York: "Sampling their voices, their laughter, their breathing, despite the fleetingness of the encounters we had with each of them, or perhaps on account of that very fleetingness, we were offered an intimacy like no other: an entire life lived parallel, in a flash, with that stranger. And recording sound, we thought, as opposed to filming image, gave us access to a deeper, always invisible layer of the human soul, in the same way that a bathymetrist has to take a sounding of a body of water in order to properly map the depth of an ocean or a lake.
That poem ends with a vow to the passing stranger: 'I am to see to it that I do not lose you.' It's a promise of permanence: this fleeting moment of intimacy shared between you and me, two strangers, will leave a trace, will reverberate forever. And in many ways, I think we kept that promise with some of the strangers we encountered and recorded over the years – their voices and stories always coming back to haunt us." (Luiselli, 2019, p. 29-30)

there? The novel's narrator poses these kinds of problems as she approaches the second half of the book, in which the lost children's stories are told.

3.4
'We walked into the unreal desert'

While watching Mexican children walking towards the airplane that will deport them in Artesia Municipal Airport, the narrator realizes that her own children were already telling stories of the lost ones in the backseat of the car, during the former three weeks, while imagining games mixing child migrants and Apaches, pretending they were lost in the desert or were Native Americans. As she listens to the ten-year-old boy telling what he sees during deportation, she decides that his version of the story should be told. "He'd understood everything much better than I had, than the rest of us had. He'd listened to things, looked at them – really looked, focused, pondered – and little by little, his mind arranged all the chaos around us into a world" (Luiselli, 2019, p. 185).

In the second part of the book, entitled *Reenactment*, the boy is the main narrator. He begins where his Mama had stopped, telling his sister how the lost children "had disappeared on a plane into the sky" (Ibid., p. 191), what had happened the past three weeks, where they had been, what he felt. He talks about the "family lexicon," the "family plot," "foundational myths," "mother tongues," "narrative arc." The sessions' names are repeated, reflecting the mother's concerns, but now in her son's words: "This is the story of us, and of the lost children, from beginning to end, and I'm gonna tell it to you, Memphis" (Ibid.). His little sister is now called Memphis, the boy is Swift Feather, Mama is Lucky Arrow and Papa is Papa Cochise. These names had been chosen before, while they were in the hotel Elvis Presley Boulevard Inn, in Graceland, Memphis, in one of the trip's most playful moments. When the boy is the narrator, the family is not unnamed anymore.

Swift Feather decides that he and his sister should both leave the hotel where they are at the moment and look for the lost children, specifically for Manuela's daughters. Going into the desert, they would be the lost children themselves, and be missed by their parents. At this point, looking back to the first part of the novel, it seems like the boy was preparing himself for his own adventure with his sister during the whole road trip. He learned how to photograph. He practiced "finger-

mapping," being able to locate himself in space and leave a map in the hotel showing where they were going, signed by Swift Feather. He carefully listened to the stories of the Apaches told many times by his Papa, including the Eagle Warriors, "a band of Apache children, all warriors, led by an older boy" (Ibid., p. 208). And, together with his sister, he had spent three weeks performing in the car's back seat, riding imaginary horses, escaping the Border Patrol, going to the desert and to outer space, while listening dozens of times to David Bowie's *Space Oddity* song. He was ready to take Memphis:

> You gave me your hand, and I held it tight. We walked into the unreal desert, like the lost children's desert, and under their blazing sun, you and me, over the tracks, and into the heart of light, like the lost children, walking alone together, but you and me holding hands, because I was never going to let go of your hand now. (Ibid., p. 294)

To prepare for their journey, Swift Feather searches into Lucky Arrow's box. There he finds notes on euphemisms such as "placing out," "relocation" and "removal," a word once used to banish Native Americans and nowadays when referring to deportation; a Migrant Mortality Report with definitions of causes of deaths in the desert: "exposure" (hyperthermia with rhabdomyolysis and dehydratation), "nonviable" (for a fetus), "blunt force injuries," "undetermined, skeletal remains"; photographs of objects found in migrants' trails in the desert; many books about archive, such as *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, by Jacques Derrida, and *Archive and Aspiration*, by Arjun Appadurai; notes about the Placing-Out Program, which sent 200,000 homeless children from New York to the West between 1854 and 1930, "the Orphan Train Riders"; a NGO map with red dots locating deaths in the desert; and a loose note: "a map is a silhouette, a contour that groups disparate elements together, whatever they are. To map is to include as much as to exclude. To map is also a way to make visible what is usually unseen" (Ibid., p. 249). Those items and others are the materials for Swift Feather's echoes.

The boy takes another important item, a small red book entitled *Elegies for Lost Children*. Unlike the other books by real authors quoted in the novel, this is an invented one, written by the fictional Italian writer Ella Camposanto (1928-2014). Even though they are not placed in space or time and are probably inspired by the

historical Children's Crusade from 1212,[74] these elegies are very similar to the stories we have been reading throughout the novel. Accompanied by a "man in charge," children cross dark wet jungles or move on the top of freight trains in the desert, imagining their end destination in the North and the relatives they were longing to see again. They have to jump the train while it is moving, just like migrant kids do on the top of *La Bestia*. They feel thirsty and hungry, they sweat under the sun. They climb the border wall and are chased by the police; some die, others run and escape.

The woman narrator didn't want to reproduce real stories, but the tragedies in the elegies are much alike them. They recall the narratives in the media and immigration courts. They are neither stuttered nor shuffled; their narrative arc, to use a recurrent session's title from the novel, is ordered and tragic. Instead of telling the horror stories differently, the elegies, the fictional stories inside the fiction, seem a textual translation of the Migrant Mortality Report or the red dots showing where migrants have died. There is the woman who falls from the gondola's roof and is found by a porcupine. There are detailed descriptions of desperate children running away at the border. Some are left behind, shot in the head just like the 72 who, according to the news, were found in a mass grave at a ranch in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. They are shot dead "when bullets pierce their livers, intestines, hamstrings. Their few belongings will outlive their corpses, and will later be found: a Bible, a toothbrush, a letter, a picture" (Ibid., p. 316).

The narrator spends the first part of the novel reaffirming a choice for disidentification, resisting to restrict children's stories and moving away from struggles of visibility or the claim for rights. When inventing the narratives of the *Elegies*, though, she reproduces common representation mechanisms she wanted to take distance from. The same happens with the boy's narrative arc, an adventure that mixes the suffering and some of the same challenges of the "original" lost children with the fantasy of the bravery of the Apaches that he and his sister were always enacting in the car. His narrative is a mixture of the stories Mama and Papa had told them during three weeks on the road toward the south of the United States.

[74] The narrator explains: "In Camposanto's version, the 'crusade' takes place in what seems like a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America (the children ride atop 'gondolas,' for example, a word used in Central America to refer to the wagons or cars of freight trains)" (Ibid., p. 139).

Swift Feather and his sister go into the desert, get lost, and after they are found and safely back home, the woman narrator finds out that Manuela's daughters are dead. It is as if fiction could not do much else than repeat history.

The absence of different types of stories is pointed out by Wood (2019, my emphasis):

> It is impossible not to admire the novel's surging ambition. But this is also an oddly symptomatic book, characteristic of our age's self-doubts, divided between the quotidian realism of diaristic autofiction and the magical privileges of unfettered fiction-making (the kids in the desert, Ella Camposanto's texts). *What is missing – the absence is surely intended – is, precisely, the middle: an artifice bold enough to invent and evoke the day-to-day specificities of people whose lives are very different from our own, and whose hardship seems almost unreachable*. Oddly, such stories hardly appear in this passionately engaged book.

Wood's analysis is fundamental for the discussion about the representation of lives "whose hardship seems almost unreachable," a point both *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive* highlight over and over again. The unreachability of migrants' lives, because they exceed what is familiar to the narrator about them, has led the narrator to question her ways of approaching those lives, to hesitate and reflect on which and how stories she should tell. This is one of the book's central themes. However, when they "perform – imaginatively inhabit – the brutal hardships of other less fortunate (…) the narrator's kids merely enact the dilemmas of the narrator" (Ibid.).

Therefore, reenactment, in this case, doesn't frame the world differently, doesn't rearrange the perceptible field, and, consequently, doesn't explore how a politics of imagination can approximate us to the unfamiliar that seems unreachable. On the other hand, a dissolving move into disidentification as a refusal of representation doesn't erase the fact that each one must forge their own life, even if in tactical terms, inside an everyday fulfilled by categories of representation and forms of co-optation and normalization. Papadopoulos et al. (2008, p. 217) oppose bordering practices such as passport numbers (*being* as restricted identification) to the multiple possibilities of migrant's *becomings*: "If being is a passport number, migrant's becomings are countless. The multiplication of beings. Two, three, many passports! Dis-identification = being everyone. Because you must be everyone in order to be everywhere." However, if there is excess that does not fit into identity politics, it is nevertheless built in singular lives, which are not addressed in the

novel. The self-awareness repeatedly shown in *Lost Children Archive* seems, up to this point, to have precluded it to imagine other lives.

That does not mean that fiction narratives should be nicer than reality or successful stories. Victims and heroes usually occupy the same structural role in the liberal inclusion-exclusion schemes of deserving a part in political representation. Anyway, fictional stories are what they want to be. But if imperceptibility creates a kind of political subject different than the other that can easily be included in the logic of representation and rights, then maybe the reenactment of this subject should in some way try to preserve what is at the border of victim and hero, refugee and immigrant, lost children and protected children.

3.5
'Names were like a gift given to people'

Little by little, lost children gain more concreteness in the novel. In one of the last elegies, the names of the children on their journey North are finally known: Marcela, Camila, Janos, Darío, Nicanor, Manu (the name of an important character of *Tell Me How It Ends*). Later, during the ride on the top of the train, one of the kids tells the others that warrior children were given names only when they grew older, because they had to earn them: "[N]ames were like a gift given to people", he explains. "The names were not secret but they also couldn't be used just like that by anyone outside the family because a name had to be respected, because a name was like the soul of a person but also the destiny of a person" (Luiselli, 2019, p. 314).[75] The kid then whispers warrior names to each one of the others and "[t]hey smile perhaps for the first time in days, receiving his whispered word like a gift" (Ibid.). It is not revealed to readers, though, what the names are.

As the novel moves toward its end, the elegies and Swift Feather's storytelling are progressively mixed up, and characters and perspectives change with no clear passages. The rhythm intensifies, punctuation ceases. Children's stories are then shuffled and shuffling brings them to meet in the narrative. The climax is a scene in which the *Elegies*' four "lost children" who survived shots at the border encounter Swift Feather and Memphis in an abandoned train car.

[75] Papa used these exact words when he gave the names Swift Feather and Memphis to the kids in the hotel in Graceland, "telling us how Apaches earned their names," the boy recalls (Ibid., p. 281).

Together they find an eagle nest and make a fire to boil its three eggs, finally feeding themselves after having no food in the desert, not without some guilt. They act like the Eagle Warriors from the Apaches' narratives and tell stories to each other. They are finally inside a safe and still train car, protected from the storm, not on its moving roof.

The encounter produces transformations. It is worth quoting a passage at length, in which a change in the narrative's form can also be noted:

> (…) I rushed to my feet in a panic, and leaned out the wide-open doors of the wagon, and noticed the sun was above the mountain already, and you were there, I saw you, was so relieved, you were sitting on the ground some steps from the wagon, patting mud, I'm making mud pies for breakfast you said, and look I have a bow and arrow so we can hunt something, too, you said, and lifted up a plastic bow and arrow from the ground by your side, where did you get that and where are the other four children I asked, and you said they had left, they'd left right before sunrise, and you said you'd got the bow and arrow in a trade, told me you'd traded some stuff from my backpack with the older girl, and in return she gave you the bow and arrow, what, I asked you, what are you talking about, I repeated, looking around the wagon for my backpack and then shuffling things inside around it to see what was missing, Ma's big map was missing, the compass was missing, the flashlight, the binoculars, the matches, and even the Swiss Army knife were missing, so I jumped off the wagon with my light backpack around one shoulder, walked over to you, stood right above you, why did you do that I screamed, because we're going to meet Ma and Pa today so we don't need that stuff anymore Swift greedy Feather, you said, talking so calmly, and I was so angry at you, Memphis, furious, how do you know we will meet them today I asked you, and you said you knew because Pa had told you that the end of the trip was when you lost your second tooth, and though that was silly and made no sense, it made me feel some hope, maybe we would find them today, but I was still furious, you'd given away my stuff, at least you didn't give away my camera and my pictures I said, then you turned your head up to look at me and said well I also traded my book with no pictures and my backpack, oh yeah for what, I asked you, for hats you said, one for me and one for you, and you pointed your finger to two hats on the ground a few feet from you, a pink one and a black one, the pink one is yours and the black one is mine you said (…) (Ibid., p. 335-336).

When Swift Feather woke up, his little sister had exchanged his flashlight, binoculars, knife, maps and other practical objects for a plastic bow and arrow and two hats, a pink one and a black one, from the four kids. It is the little girl, who is still learning how to read and won't have a memory from this time except for her brother's stories, who very naturally exchanges useful things for useless ones. A five-year-old who is still not totally inserted in language, who hasn't learned to photograph like her brother, and for whom maybe pictures would still come out white if she tried to take them. A girl similar to the one who was coloring a book

while the older sister tried to answer the questionnaire in *Tell Me How It Ends*, too young to know that a man could also be a coyote. Children's imagination of a world, in this sense, is a possible way of detouring from bureaucracy because it does not even aim to oppose bureaucracy.

The empty boxes taken by the children in the car's trunk are now full. Finally, there is a *Lost Children Archive*, collected by Swift Feather and Memphis (Luiselli, 2019, p. 340-344). There is an inventory of sounds, composed of different types of echoes, such as car echoes ("Cow, horse, feather, arrow, ow, ow, us playing"), desert echoes ("Shrrrrrr, sssssssss, hsssssss, sss, hhhh, dust-clouds appearing and disappearing") and strangers' echoes from diner, gasoline station, motel and Border Patrol's conversations. There are also polaroids taken by the boy during the road trip: the little girl with curly hair standing beside a bench; the façade of Elvis Presley Blvd. Inn and the bedroom with Elvis' picture on the wall; the sign *Geronimo City Limits*; the deportation plane seen from the holes of a wired fence; the Apaches' tombs in the cemetery; wagons of a train; a man in a diner; almost empty landscapes; Memphis with the black hat. And a document: a recording version of the road trip left for his sister, who can listen to it when she grows older.[76]

The novel indeed misses "an artifice bold enough to invent and evoke the day-to-day specificities of people whose lives are very different from our own," as Wood (2019) affirms. But a little part of this final fable points to other possibilities for the children's destiny. The harsh conditions did not disappear, but the children have, even if for a very short moment, a world possibly less devastated. It is just a tale, and one in a novel concerned with children in the news, children who keep crossing the desert alone and stuttering when arriving. Readers don't get very close to those children. But when humor and fantasy come to the boy's storytelling, they bring to the novel some affections other than the commotion that usually freezes but doesn't change anything, as mentioned by Luiselli when remembering the story of "Los 72" in *Tell Me How It Ends*.[77]

There is always some degree of violence in naming, but names can also be a gift. In the face of a violence that exceeds our capacity to define it, meaning is

[76] A story about conflicts between the couple unfolds in parallel in the novel, culminating with their breakup. By the end of the road trip, the narrator and her son leave Arizona, where her husband stays with his daughter to develop his project.

[77] Chapter 6 discusses a paralysis caused by commotion with migrants' stories, what Macé (2018) calls "sideration" instead of consideration.

found in each singular and relational life, even if a certain degree of incomprehension, some unfamiliarity, remains. In *Lost Children Archive*, it is in obtaining what they don't need, after an encounter with other children, that brother and sister can, after all, as if they were Eagles Warriors, go to the Echo Canyon, where Lucky Arrow and Papa Cochise will find them. In the end, the found objects in the desert – Bible, toothbrush, letter, pictures – won't be the ones that "will outlive their corpses." What will outlive the ones who have died in the desert will be the things taken by the ones who survived and brought them to life.[78] A plastic bow and arrow, a pink hat, and a black hat.

3.6
'Reenactment'

The first part of the chapter analyzed how Luiselli's works highlight the problem of addressing stories of unprivileged and highly categorized, therefore overly represented people who migrate and ask for another state's protection. In the essay *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli explicitly points to the restrictive legal framing of the stories she translates, which always exceed any intake questionnaire. While the writer shows how children's shuffled stories don't conform to the expectations of abuse or political persecution, she looks closer to one that fits the "asylum story," including material proof of persecution. It is this narrative that Luiselli uses to defend the protection of unaccompanied children, which she names *refugees*, opposing them to *immigrants*, *illegals* or *undocumented minors*, and showing the difficulty of framing migration outside states' parameters. The novel *Lost Children Archive* works as a kind of response to the problems pointed out by the essay and a search for other possible names for refugees that are not attached to the law. Through fictional characters, the narrator discusses means of representing the world through photography and sound, and the differences between inventory (fragmentary) and narrative (more concerned with coherence). Having this discussion as a background, she substitutes the word *refugees* for *lost children*.

Luiselli's dilemmas of how to tell children's stories fostered a deeper theoretical discussion on representation and its critique, which is central not only to this chapter but to the whole dissertation. I first connected Luiselli's move with

[78] This is a reference to Tim Ingold's text *Bringing Things to Life* (2010).

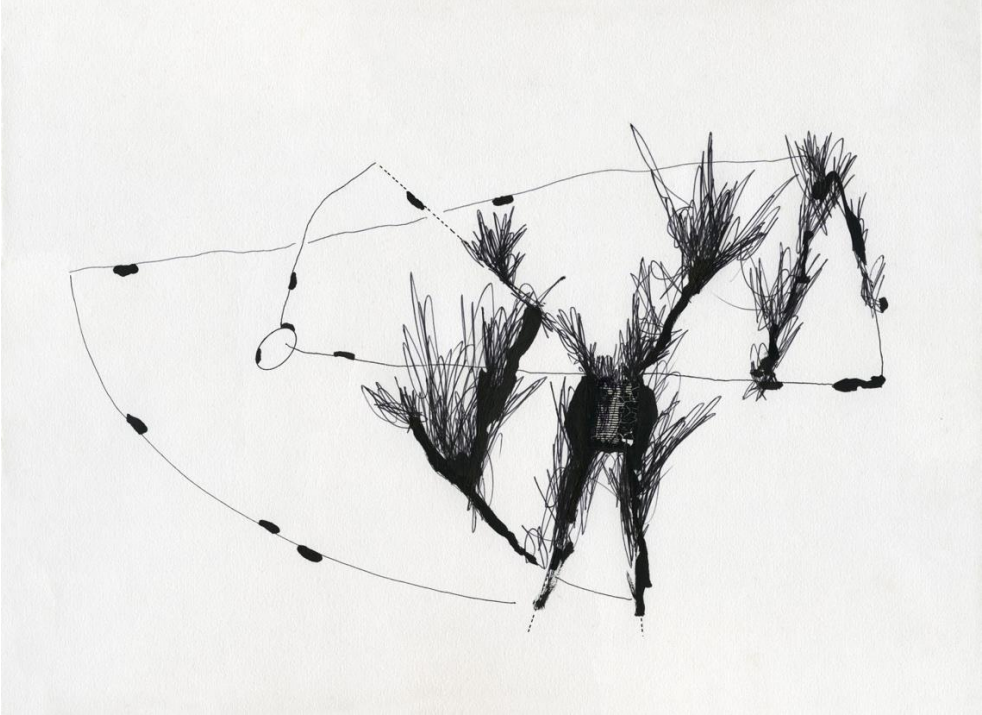
Auchter's (2013) discussion on what she calls "counter-memorials" dedicated to missing or undocumented dead migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, which, according to the author, commemorate absence instead of individual lives as memorials do. I then related this praise of anonymity – *lost children* instead of *refugees* – to some works from the autonomy of migration approach, for which it is possible to escape (and not merely resist) the logic of political representation that orders statecraft's processes of inclusion-exclusion. Papadopoulos et al. (2008) call practices of escape *outside politics* or *imperceptible politics*, which oppose the policing of representation. Against the dichotomy of visibility/invisibility as a guide to thinking about migrants' agency, I argue that the focus on imperceptibility risks generalizing migration and treating migrants as figures (Sharma, 2009). Besides that, invisibility/imperceptibility is not necessarily positive for migrants but is frequently imposed by the conditions in which people are or are not allowed to move (Ibid.; Stierl, 2017; Tazzioli, 2019). That is an argument that accompanies the whole dissertation.

In *Lost Children Archive*, the search for other ways to tell a story of vulnerable migrant children, which is recurrent in both essay and novel, ends up with the narrator's decision to tell the stories of the *lost children* through the perspective of her own son. He becomes the narrator of the second part of the novel, called *Reenactment*. The chapter then analyzed how the fictionalization of children's stories is not a guarantee of not reproducing the usual "asylum story" plot: both the boys' narrative and the fictional book he reads, *Elegies for Lost Children*, are very similar to the narratives in the media and immigration courts. They are neither stuttered nor shuffled, they have an ordered and tragic narrative arc. In this sense, they are not able to maintain children lost in some way when telling their stories, as explicitly intended by the narrator.

But while the lost children's stories do not enact a different plot, the last section of the chapter points to a breach in the novel where imagination can enter. It is when there is an encounter between the fictional children from the *Elegies* and the narrator's children, who had gone into the desert to look for Manuela's kids. When children play together, not trying to live up to the horrors of what happens at the border but relating to each other, they invent new names and stories. It is not by chance that it is the five-year-old girl, who is still not totally inserted in language, who exchanges useful objects to navigate in the desert for "useless" ones. It is

through these useless objects that they can, even if for a very brief moment, install a seesaw through a wall. They point to possibilities of naming that are ambivalent and relational, not completely inscribed in the logic of citizenship. Some of these are explored in the following chapters of the dissertation. Considering politics as a dispute for naming the world, they bet not on disidentification as an escape from policing or an impossible aim to transcend representation, but on the possibility of shaking its sense of order.

4
‘When an entire world you don’t know crashes down on you, how do you start sorting it all out?’[79]



What vegetation is there in your country? Do people have pets? Did you learn a trade? When the Italian coast guard tried to take the refugees aboard, all of them rushed to one side of the boat, and that’s why the boat capsized. (The door opens, a black man looks in, says something in a language the visitor doesn’t understand – Hausa, perhaps? – he receives an answer and disappears.) Did you go to school? Rashid couldn’t swim. He grabbed onto a cable, and this is how he remained above water. Zair can’t swim either, but as the boat began to tip upside down, he climbed over the edge of the boat sticking up in the air to its underside, and from there he was rescued. What kind of place did you like to hide when you were a child? But 550 out of 800 drowned. The TV now shows a large number of fish on a conveyor belt, women’s hands in rubber gloves pick up each fish and in just a few seconds slice it into filets with a large knife. In Hamburg they ran into each other again, Rashid and Zair, and recognized each other at once. The sleeper snores on. They were on the same boat. 550 out of 800 drowned. Richard no longer desires any more information on fish processing. So he asks: Does one of you maybe remember a song? A song? No. One doesn’t, the other doesn’t, and a third doesn’t either. But Abdusalam does. For the first time he looks up briefly, it’s the first time he’s said a word, maybe he’s ashamed because he’s slightly cross-eyed. Just as Richard hoped, someone turns down the volume on the TV, and Abdusalam looks down again, at his hands, and begins to sing. (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 61)

[79] All pictures in this chapter are drawings, sculptures and art installations by the Brazilian artist José Damasceno.

Richard, a recently retired professor at the Humboldt University, in Berlin, approaches refugees[80] from different African countries with a "catalog of questions" (Ibid, p. 49, 52). Some are similar to the intake questionnaire of *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017), by Valeria Luiselli, examined in chapter 3; others would never be in it. Richard was never interested in refugees before, they just happened to be a new sort of project to spend his now empty days. He imagines that two weeks of reading about the subject and an extensive list of questions should prepare him to talk to them: "to investigate how one makes the transition from a full, readily comprehensible existence to the life of a refugee, which is open in all directions – drafty, as it were – he has to know what was at the beginning, what was in the middle, and what is now" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 49). But the beginning, middle and now are not so clear at the accommodation center where refugees are placed after their self-organized camp at Oranienplatz, a square in Berlin, is dismantled. Exhausted after less than one hour of interviews, what Richard gets on his first visit to the center is an overwhelming collection of data, unanswered questions, and observations about the time spent by people who wait to know if they can wait in Germany. "When an entire world you don't know crashes down on you, how do you start sorting it all out?" (p. 62), asks Richard about his new encounters. He could also be speaking about those refugees and their experience in Europe.

Richard is the protagonist of the novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015), by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated from German to English by Susan Bernofsky as *Go, Went, Gone* (2017).[81] He is a widower with no kids and lives alone in the countryside of what was once East Berlin, in a house by the lake. As a German professor of Classical Philology[82], he used to be shocked when his students could not recite the first lines of the *Odyssey* in Greek, but had no clue there were as many as 54 African countries in the world. Having grown up in communist Berlin, he is

[80] Even if they are not recognized as refugees, as we will see, I use the term "refugee" here as a discursive category, a logic related to the making of a figure, as pointed out in chapter 2. I also refer to "would-be" refugees/asylum seekers when willing to stress the legal dimension of refugeeness and its effects in temporality and subjectivity.

[81] All the quotes in this dissertation are from the English version of the novel, first published in Great Britain by Portobello Books.

[82] Before learning that Richard was a professor of Classical Philology, we know about his honors and understand that his teaching and research have to do with old history, literature, language. We soon learn in the novel that he has a study called *The Concept of the World in the Work of Lucretius* and his students have written about Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*

not entirely comfortable in his own city, and until today feels out of place in the former West, not able to locate himself well in central neighborhoods. When he approaches refugees, as the quote opening this chapter exemplifies, there is a clash between his ordered world, in which clear questions lead to clear answers and conclusions, and a world that he cannot possibly come near only with his academic's methods of knowing. As McHugh-Dillon (2018) affirms in an article about the novel, "it is not always as simple as asking: glimpses from the men's perspective point to the great depth of experience that remains inexpressible – and private." Theirs is a stuttered, shuffled, shattered world, as Luiselli (2017, p. 7) would say.

There is no radical transformation when Richard, by the end of the novel, is affectionate with refugees and helps them in ways that were unimaginable at the beginning. He still has flaws, privileges, prejudice and ignorance about their worlds. He still calls his new friends "my Africans."[83] But this is indeed a story of a man's change, one that is plausible because he is affected by relationships that bring something back to him, and that he can receive because he has time to look and listen. *Go, Went, Gone* is also a story about the mismatch between the letter of law and the lives it regulates, specifically the lives of (would-be) refugees. The law works exactly to erase this mismatch, which is promptly perceived when Richard asks Africans questions that seemed so simple but cannot be easily answered, and starts relating to them. This chapter is partially dedicated to this disengagement between law and experiences, abstractly analyzed in chapter 2. But more than showing the tension between categories and lives, it aims to point to the impossibility to escape language. It is through language that refugees make sense of a crashed world, even though, as we will see, their words may falter. It is also the way for Richard and refugees to relate, albeit imperfectly and with huge asymmetries imposed by their legal, social and economic conditions. If violent events affect the course of life, the work of recovering its meanings cannot be made except in the everyday lives of singular people. Singularities do not mean an

[83] As mentioned in chapter 2, I have frequently heard people in Germany refer to refugees they were involved with as "my refugees". A text about Erpenbeck's talk at Harvard University in 2018 notes that the author herself called those she met and interviewed "my refugees." Available on: https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/3/30/erpenbeck-event/. Last access: March 7, 2023.

individuation of lives, but ways in which subject and context are put in relation, as "mutually constitutive of the work of inhabitation" (Das, 2014, p. 280).

The chapter closely follows the narrative and the "aesthetic subjects" (Shapiro, 2013) of *Go, Went, Gone*. At the beginning of the novel, ten black refugees seek to "become visible" without saying their names in a hunger strike in Berlin, but Richard, even passing closely, fails to see them. The attempt to be visible in a way that clashes with a normalized mode of seeing/knowing, and failing to do so, guides a debate on visibility/invisibility, already introduced in chapter 3. I argue that it is more important to analyze how and for whom one becomes visible or escapes from sight, to understand the conditions for being seen, than defend either side of the binary. The debate on the limits of seeing/knowing is connected, in a second section, to how language, as boundaries' makers, works not just as forms of discrimination but also connecting: language as a skin, which both protects what is inside and is vulnerable to the outside world.

The third section examines how the rigid line that gives Richard's "sense of order" and initially prevents him from seeing the hunger strikers – which corresponds to a legal line that separates the German citizen from the African refugees – slowly turns into crisscrossing storylines between him and them. The section puts in parallel refugees' lives and specific regulations regarding asylum procedures, stressing their incompatibility. Richard does not just get to know the law abstractly. African black men are his conduit to learning the letter of the European/German white law, and not the other way around. The stories of Awad, Apollo and Ithemba are narrated in ways that stress their hesitance, failures of memory and apparently out-of-place contextualizations that frame lives beyond the rigid lines of the law. There is a move toward other lines different from the bureaucratic geometry between the professor and the refugees, even if a fundamental asymmetry regarding citizenship remains.

The fourth section turns to the temporal aspect of refugeeness. Illegalization freezes the life of would-be asylum seekers, who are not treated as political subjects. Consequently, their waiting time is "unreclaimable, since it is not considered to have existed at all" (Khosravi, 2018, p. 40). Nevertheless, refugees' experiences also exceed temporal mechanisms of control, preserving some untamed time. I exemplify the tension between a frozen time and an untamed time through the relationship between Richard and Osarobo, an 18-year-old boy who is not able to

see a future but has desires and urgencies of a life that continues while the law puts it into brackets. I suggest that this temporal contrast between the "not yet" of European colonization and the "urgency of the 'now'" (Chakrabarty, 2008) is where the relationship between refugees' conditions in the present and colonialism is most strongly felt in the novel.

Refugees have commonalities in their experiences, but their singular voices, which can be found in silences or gestures, exceed what is categorizable of them. Inspired by Das' (2007, 2014) work on voice and everyday life, the chapter ends with two more stories of Richards' encounters with refugees, Karon and Rashid, to think about the possibilities of inhabiting a crashed world after violence. While they wait, in the "urgency of the 'now'" that could not be paralyzed by the "not yet" of the law, Karon and Rashid have singular fugitive moments when, in the "mutually constitutive of the work of inhabitation" (Das, 2014, p. 280) with the context, they are not the typical refugees.

Throughout the novel, Richard is able to look at his own ignorance and prejudices without self-indulgence. To sort a new world out, he will have to live through it in an improvised manner, using the resources he has and finding new ones. In the end, Richard gets closer to the answers when his "project" melts into his life, when he realizes that his objects of knowledge are in fact relationships and he is also subject to questioning. Erpenbeck slowly sews a text in which reflection comes in bits, through encounters and estrangements. It is important to stress that, while very self-aware and directly philosophical in many passages, *Go, Went, Go* takes the step further to contaminate these ideas in the plot, not as an illustration of concepts, but enmeshed in them. The relationships reveal the excess of experiences not only of refugees but also of Richard, who struggles to make sense of the feelings and memories these relationships bring him. The stories brought up in the encounters are sometimes shuffled, other times stuttered, others forgotten, others more clearly said. The different ways in which these stories are told, the hesitations, silences and overtalking highlight the insufficiency of categories to sort those crashed singular worlds out, even if the author does not avoid narrating the violence implicated in refugees' migratory paths.[84]

[84] At the end of the novel, Erpenbeck (2017, p. 334) lists and thanks 13 people for the conversations she had with them, whom we imply are refugees she met in Germany.

4.1
'We become visible': how and for whom?

Refugees, mostly Black Africans, actually occupied Oranienplatz, a square in a central neighborhood in Berlin, Kreuzberg, from October 2012 to April 2014. They had come from different parts of Germany, some by bus and others walking 28 days on foot, taking the risk of deportation because they were legally required to remain in their district of registration (*Residenzpflicht*). The self-organized camp formed by plastic tents lasted two cold winters at Oranienplatz, where up to 200 people slept and had food, discussed political strategies and partied. Some would come and go, others spent the whole time there, participating in protests with three main demands, all related to the possibility of moving and choosing where to be: the end of deportations, the end of the *Residenzpflicht* and the end of common accommodation centers. In parallel, people also occupied an empty building that used to be a school, and some spent nine days protesting on its terrace when Berlin's government decided to evacuate the place.

Go, Went, Gone has scenes at Oranienplatz and in an abandoned school, both occupied by the fictional refugees and visited by Richard. But the novel does not tell many details about the occupations. Instead of focusing on what has become the widely known O-Platz movement and its publicized political demands, the writer concentrates the story on a moment when the refugees had already been taken out of the square and the school, after the government dismantled their tents. They were taken to different accommodations far from the city center, where they had to follow strict rules of coming and going and fixed times to eat or circulate, in contrast to the self-organized routines in the other apparently more precarious places. This disciplining is part of what Darling (2011, 2014) calls *domopolitics*, the protection of a political order which is equated with *domos*, the house, the intimate and familiar space, and depends on categorization and control of those bodies that threaten it.[85] Migration management becomes "part of a police order that views asylum

[85] Kotef (2010) analyzes how the idea of homeland serves the state in supporting mechanisms of containment, exclusion and imprisonment. Homeland, she affirms (Ibid., p. 16), is "a metaphor that relies on structural resemblance, a metaphor that the state needs as a justifying mechanism (the state is 'natural' and hence 'good' or 'worthy' because it is a type of home), as a recruitment mechanism (whose paradigm is perhaps the notion of 'brothers in arms'), as a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion ('we are all brothers, it is said, deploying an 'all' that always excludes: migrant workers, immigrants, Palestinians, and other Others). And yet, it is (only) a metaphor."

seekers/refugees as suspect presences to be detained, contained and removed, a means of naming, distributing and defining those under question by the nation" (Darling, 2014, p. 77).

Domopolitics depends both on a spatial control that works by making it harder for refugees to participate in the life of the city, obliging them to live in places mostly far away from the center, with strict rules of circulation; and on a temporal control that suspends refugees' lives, leaving them in a waiting state that can last for years.[86] Camps, usually in rural areas, have been historically the main place for managing a spatiotemporal order in accordance to a speechless figure of dependence. In contrast, urban refugees could more easily escape the controlling eyes of the state and humanitarian organizations. Since "the refugee camp sets the terms of categorization that shape the subjectivities of differently positioned forced migrants"[87] (Darling, 2017, p. 181), urban refugees are managed through strategies of both containment in accommodation centers and their dispersal, mostly far away from the city center. Analyzing mechanisms of dispersal in Italy and France and their colonial legacy, Tazzioli (2020, p. 511) examines how they work to preclude the building of migrant alliances in time, finding "ways for preventing and disrupting the emergence of collective subjects and, at the same time, for dismantling migrant spaces of life."

Considering the potential emergence of migrant collective subjectivities, the workings of domopolitics relate to the making of refugeeness as a passive condition, as seen in chapter 2, to which refugees must conform. They are expected to be grateful for any living conditions and for what is offered to them to spend time. As Picozza (2017, p. 251) poignantly states, in an ethnography related to the waiting of asylum procedures in Italy, "[w]e 'normal people' eat food, play music, or watch films, while 'they' do "activities'." In the novel, activities are a green pool table, TV programs and some German lessons, even though refugees may soon be sent back to Italy, where they arrived from Libya, and never really be able to practice

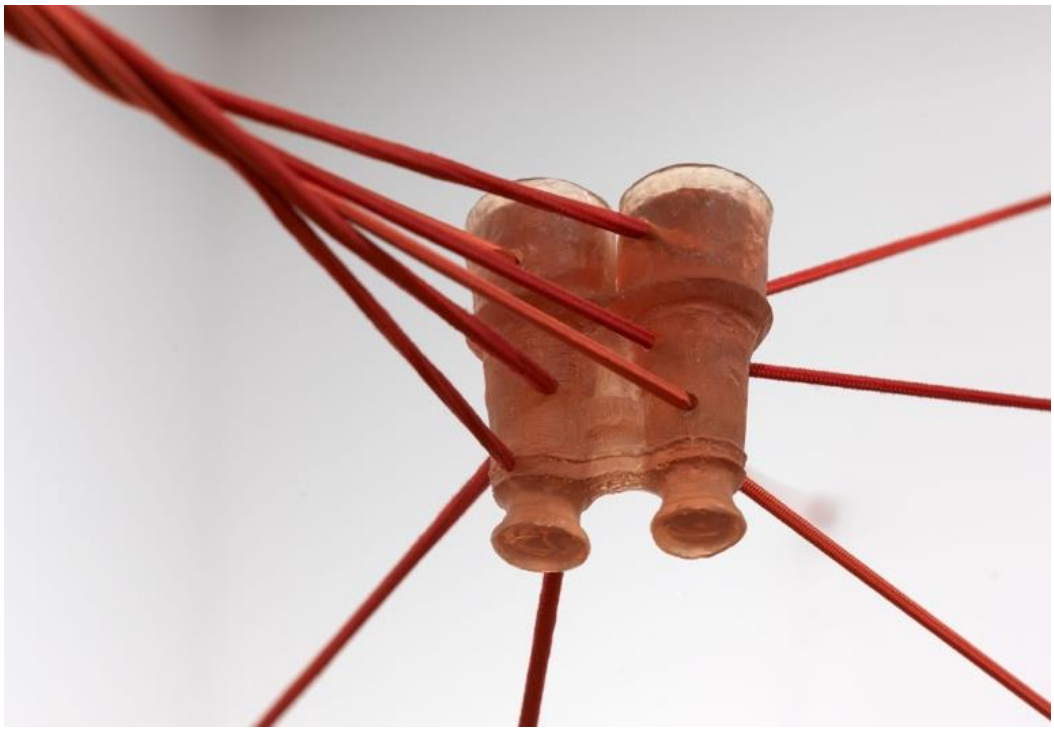
[86] I have elsewhere specifically analyzed how the O-Platz movement has defied the logic of domopolitcs by the abandonment of closed spaces around Germany and taking place at Oranienplatz. Activists looked for the possibility of being either present or absent, coming and going, out of the state's control (Velasco, 2019).

[87] Darling (2017, p. 179) acknowledges the problems of the category of "forced migration," but defends its use since the nation-state keeps commanding political imaginaries and it is "a language that still dictates much policy and academic discussion."

German.[88] There is no sense of privacy for them. Every employee from the center enters the usually shared rooms without waiting for an answer. They just quickly knock to warn and go in, "like a doctor or nurse in a hospital ward" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 59). Since there is not much to do, many refugees spend the day sleeping in cot beds. Their life is on hold. At some point, Richard admits that, before spending time with refugees, he did not understand why they needed a transit pass to move in the city if they do not have a job or money to go to museums. "Couldn't they just go for walks around the lake? And if one of them did want to travel to the city center, why didn't he just dodge the fare and ride without paying?" he says, ironically proposing an "'illegal transit pass for illegal aliens" (Ibid., p. 215).[89]

At the beginning of the novel, Richard did not know that refugees were occupying a square in Berlin for almost a year: he was himself living an insulated but privileged life, between his home and the university. And he did not see any refugees even when, already retired, he passed by ten black men protesting in a hunger strike in front of Berlin's Townhall at his well-known Alexanderplatz, which was once the heart of East Berlin. Richard was at the square to visit an excavation site of a subterranean marketplace that existed underneath it during the Middle Ages, invited by an archeologist friend. Up in the city again, looking at Alexanderplatz, he remembers the communist times and the promise of plenitude which would come in "the next hundred, two hundred, or at the very most three hundred years" (Ibid., p. 19). His mind between the city's past of the excavation site – which reminds him of the medieval tunnels under the city of Rzeszów, in Poland, where Jews would hide during the war until Nazis filled them with smoke – and the failed promise of a communist future, Richard did not see the ten men in a hunger strike. Watching the news later that evening, he gets to know the existence of a yearlong refugee occupation at Oranienplatz and wonders how come he did not notice the men in protest at Alexanderplatz, even doubting the images on TV.[90]

[88] "It's difficult to learn a language if you don't know what it's for." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 92)
[89] In similar judgments, Richard questions why a refugee had a phone with internet access or a laptop and, looking at a fat man, imagines he is not doing so badly.
[90] "Did it even matter whether these images flashing past, in tenths of seconds, really shared a time and place with the horrors that gave rise to the reports? Could an image stand as proof? And should it? What stories lay behind all the random images constantly placed before us? Or was it no longer a matter of storytelling?" (Ibid., p. 26)



The ten men – "refugees apparently" (Ibid., p. 24), according to the evening news – held a cardboard saying *We become visible* but refused to say their names:

> Who are you, they're asked by police officers and various city employees who've been called in. We won't say, the men reply. But you have to say, they're told, otherwise how do we know whether the law applies to you and you are allowed to stay here and work? We won't say who we are, the men say. If you were in our shoes, the others respond, would you take in a guest you don't know? The men say nothing. We have to verify that you are truly in need of assistance. The men say nothing. You might be criminals, we have to check. They say nothing. Or just freeloaders. The men are silent. We are running short ourselves, the others say, there are rules here, and you have to abide by them if you want to stay. And finally they say: You can't blackmail us. But the men with dark skin don't say who they are. They don't eat, they don't drink, they don't say who they are. They simply are. The silence of these men who would rather die than reveal their identity unites with the waiting of all these others who want their questions answered to produce a great silence in the middle of the square called Alexanderplatz in Berlin. Despite the fact that Alexanderplatz is always very loud because of the traffic noise and the excavation site beside the new subway station.
>
> Why is it that Richard, walking past all these black and white people sitting and standing that afternoon, doesn't hear this silence? (Ibid., p. 16-17)

The refugees-activists are aware that their names will immediately enter the state's controlling mechanisms. They know that to say their names, in this context,

is to subsume to the disciplining proper of domopolitics.[91] They seem to be claiming that there are ways of being seen other than the ones framed by the politics of citizenship. Nevertheless, announcing their visibility, making their bodies visible without saying their names, does not guarantee that they actually *are* seen in any different manner.[92] A consolidated distribution of the sensible settles given possibilities for one to be seen and listened to (Rancière, 2004), a distribution that refugees try to challenge. Police officers, city employees and a reporter eager for something to happen so she can have a story approach the hunger strikers at Alexanderplatz but do not know other ways of seeing/knowing. Neither does Richard, although, for some reason "[h]e'd liked the notion of making oneself visible by publicly refusing to say who one is" (Ibid., p. 29).

In the novel, when the hunger strikers show themselves but do not say their names, they, at the same time, make a political claim for recognition while refusing a certain type of visibility. The narrator says: "(..) they don't say who they are. They simply are." Would it be possible? This situation, in practice, cannot sustain itself for long. If those refugees want to stay and work in Germany, they will have to say their names. They will eventually be reinserted in the logic of rights and representation, which, in the novel, means exclusion from it. There is an irresolvable paradox of trying to be visible in a way that clashes with "seeing like a state" (Scott, 1999). The paradox opens wide the complexities regarding (in)visibility, showing that the core of the problem is understanding the conditions to be seen, how and for whom one becomes visible or escapes from sight, and not either being visible or invisible, since both can be refugees' tactics and lead to different political outcomes. The aesthetics of politics relies on changing these

[91] Richard only understands it later, when a list with refugees' names allows Berlin's administration to identify and remove them from an accommodation center.

[92] Erpenbeck builds vivid scenes where this imbalance between the possibilities of seeing and paying attention is stressed. The chapter about the layers of history in Alexanderplatz – the subterranean cellars, the communist monuments, the current hunger strike – ends with a description of the busy square and the fitness center beside the tower that the hunger strikers would see if they looked in Richard's direction: "Behind the windows they would see people on bicycles and people running, bicycling and running towards the enormous windows hour after hour, as if trying to ride or run across to Town Hall as quickly as possible, either to join them, the men with dark skin, or to approach the policemen to declare their solidarity with one or the other side, even if it would mean bursting through the windows to fly or leap the last bit of the way. But obviously both the bicycles and the treadmills are firmly mounted in place, and those exercising on them exert themselves without any forward progress. It's quite possible that these fitness-minded individuals can observe everything happening on Alexanderplatz in front of them, but they probably wouldn't be able to read, say, the words on the sign – for that, they are too far away." (Ibid., p. 20)

conditions, "in the sense that acts of political subjectivation redefine what is visible, what can be said about it and which subjects can do it" (Rancière, 2012, p. 63, my translation).

Finiguerra (2023) analyzes the epistemological conundrum of working with the categories of visibility and invisibility/imperceptibility characteristic of critical migration studies. In general terms, and as chapter 3 points out, scholarly research on migration in the last two decades has either privileged the idea of being visible/claiming rights to gain recognition or focused on the risks of co-option involved in this recognition, proposing many times a move to imperceptibility or escape from representation. Privileging situated knowledges that come from feminist studies, Finiguerra stresses that when analyses "fail to specify who sees as well as who recognises, while still centring sight somewhere, they risk reproducing particularly situated ways of seeing as unmarked universals against which the political viability of migrant struggles is measured (Ibid., p. 7)."[93] To focus on one side of the binary does not help to approach refugees' political agency.

Ahmed (2000, p. 61) stresses the importance of the question "who speaks?," dear to postcolonial studies, but supplements it with the question "who knows?," or, more precisely, "who is knowing, here?":

> Such a shift opens out the contexts in which speaking and hearing take place: we need to ask, what knowledges are *already* in place which allow one to speak for, about or to a 'group of strangers'? (Agar 1980: 41). In other words, we need to move our attention from the production of otherness to the (re)production of strangerness.

The novel's beginning settles the context in which some knowledges are already in place, a context in which a man has learned to live and is able to look. It settles the limits of his being in the world and how the boundaries of a known world affect the ways in which one is able to see and be seen. In *Go, Went, Gone,* ten black men seek to destabilize a normalized process of knowledge production, to *become visible* without saying their names, and taken out of Alexanderplatz, fail to do so. At the same time, it is when the whole camp of Oranienplatz is dismantled and asylum seekers are taken to different places far away from the city center that Richard is able to approach them and, with time, see the ones who he could have

[93] The author uses the example of boats in the Mediterranean that might want to make themselves visible to activist networks and invisible to border patrols.

not possibly seen before. It is paradoxically in this context of forced invisibility, when asylum seekers are stuck in different accommodation centers, that the novel's protagonist establishes a relationship with people whose world is unknown to him.

4.2
Language as a skin

Richard was not able to see the refugees in the public square but begins to relate with them in a closed space where they are taken out of the city's eyes. Born during World War II, he grew up in communist Germany and one day, with reunification, suddenly belonged to a different country, "though the view out the window remained the same" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 100). Until today, he cannot really move well in the former West, feeling a bit out of place both at Oranienplatz and in the occupied school, where he attends a meeting organized by the Berlin Senate. On the other hand, the accommodation center, which is closer to Richard's own house, offers him a more controlled and familiar environment for knowing: he as a researcher, refugees as his objects of research. The improbable place for establishing relationships is an easier point of entrance for him and gradually replaced by other locations in the city as he gets closer to the refugees, even though the residence's director, with his management rules, recommends that Richard avoids doing interviews out of the building. Because the retired professor has time and insists on his visits despite feeling at a loss, his relationship with refugees changes. Even if it remains highly asymmetrical, by the end of the novel it is not simply a relationship between a researcher and his objects of research anymore.

Before approaching refugees at the accommodation center, Richard goes to the meeting in the school, even though he does not really understand why: he is neither a local resident nor a refugee. Differently from the hunger strikers, those at the meeting say their names and where they come from: Mali, Ethiopia, Senegal, Berlin, Niger, Ghana, Serbia, Berlin again. But "despite their willingness to do so, this doesn't seem to solve the problem. The capital of Ghana is Accra, the capital of Sierra Leone is Freetown, the capital of Niger Niamey" (Ibid., p. 35). Richard is surprised that he did not know there were 54 countries in Africa, but he is also aware that knowing the names of countries and their capitals won't change the abyss between him and those who come from there. What else than a name is needed?

When people introduce themselves, the retired professor feels like an intruder. He doesn't want to say his name, even if it won't reveal much about him.

While he is increasingly aware that saying a name is not enough, he also needs names to begin relating with those he doesn't know. Having difficulty remembering African names, Richard identifies refugees with names of Greek Gods such as Hermes and Apollo, legendary characters like Tristan, or qualifiers like "the moon of Wismar" or "the Thunderbolt-hurler." The idea of the insufficiency of names comes back when, interviewing refugees, Richard receives a bunch of disconnected information, as seen in this chapter's initial quote. He keeps repeating the names of African countries' different capitals, languages and religions with astonishment, he repeats them without really understanding what to make of so much data. It won't change much if he knows capitals' names by heart and gets his catalog of questions clearly answered.

What else than a name is needed, then? He has a clue when remembering his old lecture on the topic "Language as System of Signs":

> Words as signs for things. Language as a skin. But words remained words all the same. They were never the thing itself. You had to know a lot more than just the name, otherwise there was no point. What makes a surface a surface? What separates a surface from what lies below it, what separates it from the air? As a child, Richard used to push the skin around on his hot milk – a repulsive skin that had been milk just a moment before. What's a name made of? Sound? But not even that if it's written and not spoken. Maybe that's why he loves to listen to Bach: there are no surfaces, just crisscrossing storylines. Crossing here, crossing there, moment after moment, and all these crossings join together to make something that in Bach's world is called music. Each moment is like slicing into a piece of meat, into the thing itself. (Ibid., p. 41)

The skin is an analogy also used by Walker (2016) in relation to boundaries, but to oppose the idea of skin as a plain surface, which is an arbitrary way to delimit "what separates it from the air," as Richard says. "Like skin, the sea shore and the far horizon, boundaries are often very busy places," Walker (Ibid., p. 3) says, naming places with ever-changing encounters and movement, even if they are not clearly visible. In these places, there are crisscrossing lines instead of a clear line that defines what is in and out, although this might be their common representation. In the same way that a boundary is like a porous skin, a word is not just a plain surface that reveals what is underneath it. Richard slowly realizes there are many ways to get to "the thing itself" because the entanglement of crisscrossing lines

cannot be separated from "the thing". Language's ambivalence is in the entanglement, in the different paths an entanglement offers. It requires that Richard, instead of being an "empiricist subject," with his catalog of questions, embraces some passivity and be more of a "phenomenological subject," who "retains a receptive sensibility but also has an active understanding that legislates and reflects; a subject responsible for constituting the conditions under which things can appear as things" (Shapiro, 2013, p. 2).

Language is a skin, then, in the sense that skin as a border has a "destabilising logic," as Ahmed (2000, p. 45) puts it: the skin "may open out a moment of undecidability which is at once a rupture or breakage, where the subject risks its interiority, where it meets and leaks into the world at large." Aware of the risk of fetishizing the skin, Ahmed stresses that, as a border, it "also functions as a mechanism of social differentiation" (Ibid.). It separates and protects what is inside, but it is also porous. To think of language/boundary in this way, in opposition to the clear limit of a surface, would be a condition of possibility to think about a line other than one that only cuts, interrupts and divides. A line that also connects, in a not so much clear way, but through entanglements.

In the article that introduces *Out of Line*, a collection of essays dedicated to boundaries, Walker (Ibid., p. 1) affirms:

> boundaries elude any singular logic, topology or conventional account of what it means to understand political phenomena dialectically. Indeed, they affirm widespread suspicions that political boundaries are profoundly puzzling, perhaps increasingly so: in ways that disturb many familiar assumptions about where politics is supposed to occur and consequently what political life is supposed to involve, who is supposed to engage in it and under what conditions.

In the last two decades, scholars have questioned the representation of the border as a fixed line, analyzing how bordering practices occur in places very distant from demarcated territorial borders, and therefore problematizing the limits of state sovereignty (Walters, 2002; De Genova, 2005; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2011; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Opposing this representation, which insists on regulating political imaginations and territorializing identities, borders have been framed as performative, as practices of bordering, of naming, and of contestation and renaming, instead of a static element. This view has challenged the 1990s' trend of diagnosing a borderless world, which

praised globalization, pointing instead to the multiplication of borders and their location in places others than the edges of territorial states. As Casas-Cortes et al. (2014, p. 57) affirm, in a collective overview of conceptual developments in critical migration and border research, "far from flattening the world and reducing the significance of borders, the contemporary social regime of capital has multiplied borders and the rights they differently allocate across populations." Borders have been externalized to other states, via visa requirements and detention centers, and internalized through securitization technologies inside cities. That also implies new practices of border struggles being located beyond crossing territorial borders. Migrants' struggles can be everyday strategies, not only organized movements directly regarding the politics of mobility.

Walker (2009, 2016) stresses the importance of not only stating the proliferation of borders and their performative dimension, but also facing borders/boundaries practices as moments of connection, or one takes the risk of reproducing the inclusion/exclusion pattern of the modern international, adding a character of "change" to it related to flows, movement. In this case, there is a maintenance of the scalar aspect of abstract space, reinforcing the inside/outside division of politics, while politics happens within boundaries, deciding demarcations in moments of discrimination but also of connection, like a Moebius ribbon. The concept of boundaries as both separating and uniting destabilizes the rigid spatial imaginary of politics that, as seen in chapter 2, is related to transparent categorizations of the world adequate to guarantee predictability, the taming of time in space. It implies a production of provisional, porous categories, challenging the correspondence between *nomos* and space, which founds modernity and is still a regulative ideal of political belonging in the modern international. Knowledge and its "bureaucratic geometry"[94], in this sense, are shaken.[95]

[94] "Bureaucratic geometry" is a term Richard once read in a book on the consequences of colonialism: "The colonized are smothered in bureaucracy, which is a pretty clever way to keep them from taking political action." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 64)

[95] Haraway (1991, p. 200-201) affirms: "Bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice."

4.3
Shaking a 'sense of order'

Richard is a methodical man, who drinks Earl grey tea and eats two slices of bread every morning – one with honey, the other with cheese – and includes a boiled egg every Sunday. Even now he is retired, he keeps doing the same. He writes his shopping list according to the order of products disposed of in the supermarket, which was once called *Kaufhalle* – the novel always refers to changes of names depending on historical contexts. He has such a perfectly ordered life that, when visiting Oranienplatz or an occupied school, he wonders where people do laundry or if he should sit on someone's bed in street trousers. He is pleased with his routine, "a sense of order that he doesn't have to establish but only find, an order that lies outside him and for this reason connects him to everything that grows, flies, and glides, while at the same time it separates him from certain people – but this he doesn't mind" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 22, 23). His routine keeps the borders of his world stable.

This sense of order separates Richard from the African refugees, initially preventing him from seeing them. But with empty time to be filled, he decides to make them his new "project," only to quickly find out that the methods he has learned and taught all his life won't work this time. He will have to improvise while he approaches men through invented names like Hermes or Apollo and learns their actual names and what else is needed, pushing the skin around them, as he used to do on his hot milk. Some refugees were sent to an old nursing home turned into an accommodation center. They were separated by rooms according to their countries of origin, something they used to do in the tents at Oranienplatz, because they very naturally also resort to nationality to relate and communicate. In the process of getting to know these men, Richard's sense of order is shaken.[96]

On his first visit to the center, where he goes without an appointment, Richard is informed about visitation guidelines and laws he has never heard of

[96] The novel implies there were only men at Oranienplatz. They were in fact the majority in the occupation that took place in Berlin, even though one of the main leaders of the O-Platz movement was a woman from Sudan, Napuli Paul Langa, who spent four nights over a tree to protest when the square was evacuated. *Go, Went, Gone* describes when Richard arrives at the square and sees the last objects taken by the police: "Only a lone African woman remains sitting in a tree, apparently she's refusing to leave, but neither the cleaning crew nor the police show any interest in the woman or the tree. None of the other refugees is anywhere to be seen" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 52).

before, like Dublin II, a European Union regulation,[97] and the Asylum Procedure Act, which regulates asylum procedures in Germany. Little by little, Richard submerges under a load of rules regarding the management of refugees. He understands that they are not legally refugees and not even asylum seekers. It has not been decided yet if they can claim asylum in Germany because they arrived in Europe through Italy, which, according to the Dublin Regulation, is the responsible state for proceeding with their asylum claims. That means the men must wait for a decision on if they are allowed to wait in Germany. They have come from Libya, where they used to work and live, some since a young age. Nevertheless, they were born in different countries and that can differently determine their possibility of claiming asylum, even if they have all escaped from the civil war that burst in Libya in 2011. When their tents at Oranienplatz were dismantled, the men signed an agreement with the Berlin Senate that promised them legal support, analysis of the individual cases and the suspension of deportations during the procedures. For six months, social workers should accompany the refugees to the Foreigners Office, the District Office, the Social Welfare Office, to the doctor or the lawyer. To Richard's surprise, since German bureaucracy is usually dependent on loads of paper, the agreement was less than a page long and later considered invalid because a signature was missing.

The more Richard knows about German and European regulations, the less he understands how they can work, because in parallel he is getting to know the real people to whom rules should apply. It is different now: Richard does not just learn the law abstractly. He gets to know the asylum laws because he is in contact with people for whom the law should work, but he realizes it does not. Those Africans named Ithemba, Abdusalam, Ali, Rashid, Osarobo, Awad, names Richard has trouble remembering, those Africans who were born in places like Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, those black men who have spent a good part of their lives in Libya, where they escaped from war, those African black men are the conduit to the letter of the European/German white law, and not the other way around. And

[97] The Dublin Regulation, from 1990, is now on its third version, Dublin III, from 2013. Its main principle remains the same: the first country of arrival is the responsible one for "examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person." Dublin III is valid for all EU member states except Denmark. Although not part of the EU, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland also adopt it. Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013.

that makes a difference. Once again, the conditions for something to become visible matter, affecting how it is seen. The encounters with those men make it possible "to render law as an order of thought and as an authorizing force unstable," as Basaran and Guild (2017, p. 275) suggest when researching migration.

In Richard's encounters with those men, Erpenbeck details the characters' stories in ways that stress their fragmentary nature. They are rarely straightforward and not always coherent as Richard's catalog of questions or asylum interviews would expect. They are mixed with either hesitance or overwhelming information, failures of memory and contextualizations that seem out of place but, in the end,

frame lives beyond the rigid lines of the law. Erpenbeck does not avoid telling the horrors of war and the violence of displacement. But, differently from *Lost Children Archive* (2019), by Valeria Luiselli, *Go, Went Gone* risks telling stories in a prose that while straightforward in its form, also works through stuttering, pauses, repetitions and silences. Moreover, the novel risks imagining singular lives that are distant from the protagonist's life.

Richard's feelings and thoughts add to the stories of the would-be asylum seekers, their own discomforts and emotions, pointing to a clash of worlds, misunderstandings, but also to a rearrangement of places. As in the "crisscrossing storylines" (Ibid., p. 41) of a musical composition – also highlighted in the crossing of lines of Saleh Bacha's drawing in the book's cover of the German edition – there is slowly a move toward a kind of geometry other than the bureaucratic one between the professor and the refugees, even if an important imbalance is inevitably maintained. Richard is a white German citizen, while the African black man can be deported anytime, and this is a fundamental abyss. But when Richard's initial "project" melts into his own life, he receives much more than what would fit in his catalog of questions. Something unreachable, opaque, remains.

Apollo and the Dublin Regulation

A man who looks like Richard's imagined version of the Greek God Apollo learns German irregular verbs in room 2019: *gehen, ging, gegangen* (go, went, gone). He speaks Tamasheq, Hausa, Arabic, French and some Italian he learned in a camp in Sicily, where he spent one year after arriving in Lampedusa, Italy, as most of the others Richard meets. Now Apollo begins to learn a new language, German, even though he might be deported at any time and not have the chance to use it in the future. Richard begins the conversation with a simple question, one that would be in any asylum interview: "What country are you from?" The answer, though, is not so simple. "*Del deserto*, the boy says in Italian" (Ibid., p. 66). Richard insists, Apollo gives him the same answer, now in English. Then he finally says he comes from Niger. He is a Tuareg, not a Yoruba, as Richard thought from his previous research. And then comes the usual question about family. "The boy is silent. Why should he tell a stranger that he doesn't know why he never had any parents?" (Ibid., p. 67) The narrative turns to Apollo's silent reflections, a mix of speculation about what happened to his parents when he was born in the midst of

war – maybe buried alive in the sand by soldiers –, remembrances of working as a slave since he was a kid, and random thoughts about the dunes in the desert. When he finally says something, it dissonates with his thoughts: "When your mother or father has to work, you stay with your aunt, the boy says" (Ibid.).

Apollo, whose original name we never get to know, comes from the desert. Since he was ten, the young Tuareg has prepared for journeys of two or three months, taking food that would fit in a few camels' backs, moving from one place to another across the desert with a caravan. Richard, in turn, never had to buy food for more than two months and knows exactly where to find each product in the old *Kaufhalle* to spend the week. The narrative points to Richard's discomfort and out of placeness. The German man was at the accommodation center a few times, now he asks questions again but is still at a loss, he admits. He has his prejudices, as when the man shows him a picture on his phone: "So Apollo has a phone with internet access," he thinks (Ibid., p. 69). Apollo brings him estrangements, but also memories of Richard's own life, like seeing the dust from Africa on the leaves of a vineyard in Austria. And then the narrative is back to the present, to the conversations that exhaust Richard.

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Only after spending the whole day studying the Dublin Regulation does Richard understand it has nothing to do with what the men he met have been through. Since 1990, the regulation establishes that the first country of arrival in the European Union is the responsible member state for proceeding with one's asylum application. [98] It is the country where one is sent back to in case they move inside the EU. Or, in Richard's wry definition, the Dublin Regulation

> allows all the European countries without a Mediterranean coastline to purchase the right not to have to listen to the stories of arriving refugees. In other words, so-called "asylum fraud" is nothing more than telling a true story in a country where no one's legally obligated to listen, much less do anything in response. (Ibid., p. 83)

[98] Another criterion for determining the responsible member state is the existence of family relationships there. Nevertheless, as Picozza (2017, p. 233) reminds us, this is almost never mentioned since "asylum-seekers are seldom actively encouraged to disclose such information."

No one who arrives in Europe without permission can choose where to go. This is an important instantiation of a border regime that works to reinforce the figure of speechless refugees, passive receivers of what states have to offer them, with no possibility of having a say in their own future, as Picozza (2017, p. 242) well synthesizes:

> The Dublin Regulation epitomizes the mandate for state management to prevail over migrants' self-determination, which starkly reveals the Eurocentric view of refugees and asylum-seekers as objects of control and/or charitable intervention (Jackson 2002:84): their presumed desperation disqualifies them from any entitlement to making autonomous decisions about their present condition or future prospects. (Picozza, 2017, p. 242)

Italy was the first European country of arrival of Apollo and all the others Richard meets: from Libya to Italy to Germany. He tells Richard that his birthday is January 1st because that is what Italians say if you don't have a document. For this reason, Apollo, Ithemba and Rashid, who also arrived without documents, receive a gift on January 1st from Richard, a winter sweater in different colors. At this point in the novel, Richard is already closer to them, has invited them to his house and paid them to do some work for him and his friends. But the fact is that Apollo, the man "who traveled more than two thousand miles to help him with his yardwork," (Ibid., p. 180) arrived in Italy. He would not have many opportunities to practice German irregular verbs.

Awad and the safe country of origin

When Awad hears there is someone in the accommodation center doing interviews, he looks after Richard to tell his story. His mother died giving birth to him and he lived in Ghana with his grandmother until he was seven, when his father brought him to Tripoli, Libya. His father took him to school, played soccer with him, they traveled to Egypt on vacation. He taught Awad how to dry his back with a towel and how to cook. "My father told me who I am" (Ibid., p. 75). One day, his father was shot. Awad was warned by his father's friend, who said he should go home fast and lock the door. But his home was already destroyed. He waited on the street and was taken to a camp by a military patrol. Awad is eager to speak, and while he manages to tell much of what happened to him, his hyperbolic narrative and laughter show he is overwhelmed by feelings and struggles to find memories.

He speaks a lot, not paying much attention to Richard's questions. He has more questions about what he has gone through than his German interlocutor does.

> On this day, I saw the war. On this day, I saw the war.
> There were already hundreds of people in the barracks. Most of them were black Africans, but there were also some Arabs, from Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt. Not only men, but also women, children, babies, old people. They took everything away from us: money, watches, phones, even our socks, he says and starts laughing. He laughs and laughs.
> (…)
> None of us had anything left except a tshirt and pants or a skirt. For two days we sat there in the barracks while the European bombs fell on Tripoli.
> (…)
> They raised a Gaddafi flag on our boat, Awad says laughing: a Gaddafi flag!
> (…)
> War destroys everything, Awad says: your family, your friends, the place where you lived, your work, your life. When you become foreign, Awad says, you don't have a choice. You don't know where to go. You don't know anything. I can't see myself anymore, can't see the child I used to be. I don't have a picture of myself anymore.
> My father is dead, he says.
> And me – I don't know who I am anymore.
> Becoming foreign. To yourself and to others. So that's what a transition looks like.
> What's the sense of all this? He asks, looking back at Richard again.
> Now Richard is the one who is supposed to answer, but he doesn't know how. (Ibid., p. 76-78).

Awad left the camp where he stayed in Sicily after nine months, but there was no work; he wandered around the city during the day and slept at the train station. When he could get some money working in a kitchen, he bought a ticket to Berlin. After three nights of sleeping at Alexanderplatz, a man told him about a square with Africans, and he thought he would finally be able to wash. After the initial shock with the tents, "Oranienplatz has provided for him, as his father had provided for him in Libya" (Ibid., p. 81).

Richard cannot remember Awad's name. Meanwhile, he thinks of him as Tristan, the character whose mother, Blanchefleur, also died giving birth. He also has problems "remembering particular people, the hair and faces of the men who fill this room are so dark" (Ibid., p. 90). But when the men are informed that they would have to move to another accommodation, in Spandau, even further away from the city center, Richard goes back and asks Tristan/Awad one more awkward question. Erpenbeck's prose captures the character's overwhelm:

> Awad opens the door, greets him. How are you, fine, and offers him a cup of tea, the thought of the shattered window he escaped through is lodged in his head, and so is the thought of blood, and the older gentleman sits down and says he has a few more questions, if it's possible, and the thought of his father is lodged in his head, he can't manage to extract all these thoughts from his head all on his own, all the shards are lodged in there while he puts the water on to boil, the thinking is lodged in his head like a shattered animal; if only his head were a different one, but in wartime there's nothing but beatings and bullets, beatings and bullets, in wartime everything is in shards, you see the war and nothing else, and what the older gentleman would like to know is what he, Awad, had been planning to take with him when he moved to Spandau – the move is no longer taking place today. (…) Can you tell me what's in the bag? Awad dictates, and the older gentleman, who is very polite but perhaps also crazy, writes everything down carefully in his notebook (Ibid., p. 159).

*

Weeks pass. Richard has already learned from Awad that the light in Germany is not good for his skin and that people have an aura from the navel to the knees when he calls the lawyer to know about Awad's process. The German professor then understands that the Dublin Regulation is just one of the legal obstacles. Awad was born in Ghana, considered a safe country, so even in Italy his chances to get asylum are minimal. Even though he grew up in Libya, he was born in Ghana. Even though his father was shot in Tripoli, and he had to escape war, he was born in Ghana. Even though he could hear the bombs, he was born in Ghana. He is from a safe country, they say, one he hasn't been to since he was seven years old. "Procedural errors by the agency processing his application will get him a bit of an extension, but after that there probably isn't much I can do," the lawyer explains (Ibid., p. 203). Lawyers deal with procedural failures, not with justice's ones.

Ithemba and the exceptional leave to remain

On Richard's first visit to the accommodation center, overwhelmed by the mix of information, impressions and an unfamiliar environment, he asks if someone remembers a song, and Abdusalam starts singing one, as reproduced in this chapter's opening quote. It is a song everyone in Nigeria knows from the Eyo festival in Lagos. "Tall Ithemba" shows Richard pictures of the Yoruba festival dedicated to a dead king. Ithemba is always around with the group. Later, when refugees are finally moved to a new building in Spandau against their will, and Richard visits them, Ithemba brings the German man a plate of *fufu*, food from

Africa, and Richard feels moved, although he does not like the sensation: "This morning Richard left his house feeling as if he were on his way to visit someone in prison, and here he is enjoying a nice lunch in the asylum-seekers' residence" (Ibid., p. 197). Only after tasting the fish soup and goat meat prepared by Ithemba does Richard ask him how he got to Libya. The asylum procedures begin, and soon the interviews will take place. By then, some refugees already greet Richard in German and even introduce him as a supporter to a Senate delegate, from whom he hears that the Foreigners Office will be strict with applications. Meanwhile, the men do random work even with no payment, just to have something to do.

*

Richard accompanies Ithemba in a meeting with the lawyer, who laughs and repeats it a few times: "In Germany, we eat paper" (Ibid., p. 289). As with all appointments with German institutions, the meeting terrifies the Nigerian man.

> Ithemba, whom no military patrol on the Libyan border had dared to interrogate, who walked through the rocky desert for three days in scorching heat, who had demanded the day after his arrival in Lampedusa that he be returned to Libya – unfortunately this wasn't possible for the Italians – Ithemba, who has a glass eye and stands 6'3", is filled with terror on seeing a handful of words typed on official Berlin letterhead (the Brandenburg Gate in the upper right-hand corner and an eagle stamped on the lower left).
> And maybe he should be glad he doesn't yet understand what was being communicated to him. (Ibid., p. 290-291)

The would-be asylum seeker does not understand a word of the long legal explanation: Ithemba probably won't be allowed as an asylum seeker in Germany and can be sent back to Italy at any time soon. Richard, who had done his research before the meeting, asks for legal possibilities. Ithemba could claim an "exceptional leave to remain" and be allowed to look for work after some months. In this case, he would have to go through the Preferential Employment Provision: he could only have a job if there were no Germans, Europeans, or legal residents as candidates. To apply for the job, he would need permission from the Foreigners Office, dependent on a request to the Federal Employment Agency. The agency would need to confirm that "the employer is in compliance with the Preferential Employment Provision" and then "the Foreigners Office begins its own investigation" (Ibid., 293). The process could take up to four months, and the decision could be negative.

If positive, maybe the job would not available anymore. In the case of bottleneck professions, the job application could be done without this procedure**,** but the lawyer keeps explaining: for that to happen, the applicants would need a passport and, to issue a passport, some governments could in turn ask for their deportation. All this bureaucracy could be in theory resolved with section 23 of Germany's Residence Act, whose paragraph one stipulates that foreigners can be granted a temporary residence permit "for reasons of international law, on humanitarian grounds or in order to uphold the political interests of the Federal Republic of Germany."[99] But the Berlin Senate declared that it was not in Germany's interests to issue a permit to former Oranienplatz occupants. Meanwhile, they ironically cannot work "in a country where even the right to a place in heaven is predicated on work" (Ibid., p. 82), Richard thinks.

Anyway, this is all speculation. Even if Ithemba had the leave to remain, this would not guarantee him residency in Germany.

*

The "exceptional leave to remain" is the official term in English, adopted in the novel's translation, for what in Germany is called *Duldung*, which literally means *toleration*. In practice, it is a temporary suspension of deportation: until deportation occurs, one is *geduldet*, tolerated in Germany. During the 2012 march that gathered asylum seekers from different German regions towards Berlin, defying the *Residenzpflicht* and culminating in the self-organized camp at Oranienplatz and the O-Platz movement, *tolerated* people destroyed their documents. They ripped the *Duldung* ID, which has a red diagonal scratch like the ones of street signs indicating prohibition, when they arrived at the former border between West Germany and East Germany, underlining an overall artificiality of borders.

In the novel, Ithemba is not even a would-be asylum seeker. If he receives a *Duldung*, he can renovate it many times, usually for some months, and then some more, living in uncertainty until deportation comes. A person with *Duldung* needs *Geduld*, patience in German. But for now, he is just a would-be tolerated.

[99] Act on the Residence, Economic Activity and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory – Residence Act from 2008, amended in 2020, section 23, paragraph 1. Available on: https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_aufenthg/englisch_aufenthg.html#p0636.

*

"For a moment, Richard imagines what it would be like to have someone explaining these laws to him in Arabic." (Ibid., p. 84)

4.4
Frozen time, untamed time

The law refugees and Richard get in contact with clearly erases the conditions for the production of the territorialized identities it represents. If one acquires a political identity only after being recognized by a state, the moment before that happens is irrelevant to the law. According to this Hobbesian view of the world, politics happens after the foundation of sovereignty, in the relationship between already constituted subjects (citizens) and the sovereign, and not in the formation of subjectivity (Shaw, 2004). This view clashes with the encounters narrated by *Go, Went, Gone*, which places subjectivities as relationalities, permanently formed through namings and renamings. That implies, in consequence, a clash with a correspondent political imagination that, in a

foundational moment, freezes time in a spatial order. Not considering asylum seekers as political subjects, the law can suspend their time, as if their lives could stop and continue again when they are either granted asylum or deported. According to this logic, the time in-between sovereignties is a frozen time.

Not only can an asylum procedure last for a long time, but also the experience of refugeeness can endure, as chapter 3 pointed out. The making of refugeeness is not magically instituted and destitute by law; it can begin much earlier than any process for asylum recognition and have long effects after legalization (Nguyen, 2019). Just like a process of bordering does not depend on a physical border, the passivity and the speechlessness of a refugee crafted by the triad territory-identity-law are not only enacted when someone is legally one. But if "there is literally no way to be an 'illegal refugee'" (Haddad, 2008, p. 28), there are many ways of illegalizing would-be refugees. Importantly, this illegalization has effects over time. As Khosravi (2018, p. 40) affirms, in a text called *Stolen Time*, "[a]n illegalised life (time) is unreclaimable, since it is not considered to have existed at all." Until there is no legal decision, would-be asylum seekers in Germany need one more document, called *Fiktionsbescheinigung*.[100] It literally means *certificate of fiction*, and as Richard soon learns, after having thought it could have something to do with a grant for writers, it is "merely a confirmation that this person existed who had not yet been granted the right to call himself a *refugee*. But the certificate itself didn't entitle its holder to any rights" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 100).[101]

In the novel, the agreement with the Senate was that the African refugees would proceed with their applications in Berlin, but this was not allowed by the law, because most of them had already applied for asylum in other parts of Germany. Years after marching towards the German capital, camping at Oranienplatz, being moved to one accommodation, then to another further away, and making friends who have accompanied them during this time, they must return to other cities so their procedures can go on. Just to be sent back to Italy, and maybe from Italy back to Niger, Ghana, Nigeria, places most of them, who have all come

[100] *Fiktionsbescheinigung* is not an exclusive document for illegalized migrants. For foreigners waiting for a permanent temporary residency permit, the certificate functions as a temporary one.

[101] "[T]he inhabitants of this territory – which has only been called Germany for around 150 years – are defending their borders with articles of law, they assail these newcomers with their secret weapon called time, poking out their eyes with days and weeks, crushing them with months – and if that weren't enough to subdue them, they might go so far as to issue them three cooking pots in assorted sizes, a set of bedding, and a document called *Fiktionsbescheinigung*." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 99)

from Libya, haven't been for a very long time.[102] Would-be asylum seekers must wait to see if they can become asylum seekers, and only then wait to maybe become refugees. Not only the spatial containment, but also the suspension of time paralyzes many dimensions of life. The time they are required to wait in uncertainty, without being able to plan, has impacts on the present building of a future that no one knows when and where will come. "The time during which a person doesn't know how his life can become a life fills a person condemned to idleness from his head down to his toes" (Ibid., p. 281). That is clear with the "exceptional leave to remain" (*Duldung*), a status with which people can live for years, having to renovate it every few months until the renovation is not accepted anymore.[103] In each European nation-state, the law works differently in the ways it suspends asylum seekers' time, but this logic pervades the European border regime.

In his critique of historicism, Chakrabarty (2008) relates it to the temporal dimension of European colonization, the idea of progress according to which, one day, political modernity would arrive at the colonies; meanwhile, the colonized would have to remain in the "waiting room of history" (Ibid., p. 8). "That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. (…). This waiting was the realization of the "not yet" of historicism," Chakrabarty (Ibid.) says, opposing this "not yet" to the "urgency of the 'now'" that based anticolonialist movements in the 20th Century.[104] There is much one could say about the relationship of colonialism and the place/time of refugees in Europe. *Go, Went, Gone* points to this relationship in a subtle way through Richard's awareness of

[102] Richard thinks: "Does it really make such a difference, during these two or three months, while a refugee's case (which really isn't a case at all but a life) is being investigated, if that refugee is far from all his friends in a random facility or remains here in Berlin with the others?
Apparently it makes a difference." (Ibid., p. 218)

[103] One of the long-term activists of Oranienplatz was Bino Byansi (at the time known as Patras), who says there he felt free to go away and come back for the first time in Germany. The Ugandan talked about the frequent visit of the police to the accommodation center in Passau to ask him where he had been on his way to Germany. Since he kept saying he didn't remember, his asylum request was denied and he received a *Duldung* status, plus a list of organizations that could help him in Uganda. He says it lasted one year and a half for his claim to be analyzed but only one week for his appeal. Bino had gone to Germany in 2010, after being threatened for being bisexual in Uganda, he says. In 2012, when protest camps began, he constantly had to renovate his *Duldung*. He stopped showing up at official institutions and remained with no regular documents until he received a temporary residence permit in 2016, after having a daughter with a German citizen. (Velasco, 2019)

[104] Chakrabarty (2008, p. 8) affirms: "Historicism – and even the modern, European idea of history – one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else."

German colonial history.[105] He still has a globe with "German East Africa," a book called *Negerliteratur* lies in his shelf. But more than the traces of a colonial past in the present, I suggest that this relationship with colonialism is most strongly felt in the novel in the temporal contrast between the "not yet" and the "urgency of the 'now'". Just like refugees' experiences exceed territorialized borders and forms of spatial containment, finding spaces of livability, they also exceed temporal mechanisms of control proper of domopolitics, untaming time and unmaking refugeeness, even if for brief moments. Some of their lives continue while the law puts them into brackets, and the novel highlights the coexistence of these different temporalities.

4.4.1 Rhythms of life

Osarobo, an 18-year-old man from Niger who lived with his father in Libya, has been in Europe for three years. He wants to claim asylum in Germany even though he arrived in Italy, where, he says more than once, people change places when a black man sits next to them in the metro. It is still summer when he has a first unpromising meeting with Richard: the professor cannot take much information from his interviewee. There is a sense of the displacement's impact on Osarobo's life in his constant shrugs, silences about what happened to his father or his eye, and monosyllabic answers – Niger; A mother and a sister; No; Sometimes – followed by sentences such as "Life is crazy. Life is crazy" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 120). Until the interviewer diverts from his usual questionnaire and asks if there is something Osarobo would wish to do if he had the opportunity. The man says a very concrete thing: he would like to play the piano. It is something the German man can offer him in his own house. Now, not "not yet." Osarobo forgets about the first appointment they make, annoying Richard: shouldn't the refugee be grateful for the opportunity? When he finally goes, Richard leaves him with the instrument, just to realize that Osarobo has never played the piano before. In the "music room," where Richard's wife, Christel, used to practice the viola, Osarobo's notes are "crooked, lopsided, harsh, stumbling, impure," but they remind Richard that "his daily life has

[105] Focusing on the present violence and the stories of refugees and their relationship with Richard, the novel just offers hints of their connection to coloniality. It would even be too much to ask for an already quite ambitious text to do more than that.

been lacking sounds other than the ones he himself makes" (Ibid., p. 147).[106] Osarobo keeps going there to play, and Richard tries to teach him some of the notes on the piano that he hadn't used for long. They have meals together and spend hours watching videos of pianists playing.

Osarobo's presence reshapes some of Richard's rhythms of life:

> Explaining what sheet music is and that every key corresponds to a note on the page, and every so often going out again to do nothing in particular, taking advantage of the presence of another person who's alive and makes sounds (in this case notes) that turn the simple passing of time inside the house into something that resembles normal everyday life. (Ibid., p. 192)

There is an abyss between their worlds. Not only does Richard ignore facts about Niger. Osarobo has never heard about Hitler or the two world wars and cannot read a map, even having traveled thousands of miles between continents; he doesn't understand how Richard does not believe in God. Despite their differences, in-between piano lessons and pizza, the retired professor from East Germany and the 18-year-old from Niger get close in an affective way. It is not only Richard giving him something. Maybe the opposite is truer and "taking from someone who has nothing" might be the actual meaning of hospitality, as McHugh-Dillon (2018) suggests in a text about the novel.

Richard is himself idle when he meets and relates to Osarobo and the other refugees. He sees traces of his past vanish and an empty future, he is afraid of becoming invisible: a widow, without a lover he once had during his unfaithful marriage, he retires and the importance he once had in the university seems to be fast forgotten. "He is fading from view and the world is simply not noticing" (McGowan, 2017). Erpenbeck in any way equates or compares Richard's situation with the ones of the refugees but creates a protagonist whose own sense of passing time favors new encounters. In the novel, the fact that Richard is from East Germany also adds to the character's feeling of being out of place and time.[107] At the same time, Richard has very close old friends, he is not completely lonely in his

[106] "What Osarobo is playing isn't Bach, nor is it Mozart, jazz, or blues, but Richard can hear Osarobo's own listening, and this listening turns these crooked, lopsided, harsh, stumbling, impure notes into something that, for all its arbitrariness, still is beautiful." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 147)

[107] Richard wonders: "'Eastern times' is such an interesting construction, with time being assigned a point of the compass. Now it's the West for all time and in every cardinal direction in this city and land." (Ibid., p. 55)

everyday. The narrative shows relationships that were cultivated over decades, signaling the importance of friendship in his life. Although his old friends also have their somehow insulated privileged lives, they end up being affected by Richard's new ones.

Richard buys tickets for Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* in Berlin's cathedral, but when he goes to the Spandau residence to invite Osarobo, the young man had gone to Italy.[108] Osarobo needed to renew his temporary papers in Italy, while still trying to apply for asylum in Germany, a legal maneuver that the novel's context implies will never succeed. Osarobo's feeling of provisionality is strong. He often comes and goes between countries, paying a large amount of money for the trip and for renovating the documents. He asks on every occasion if Richard has any informal work for him. It is "urgent 'now'" to find work, but the law says: "not yet." Osarobo comes back before New Year's eve, but his name is on the first list of those who must return to the German cities where they applied for asylum. Now officially deportable, he disappears again. Like the German lessons, piano lessons are again interrupted, and Richard thinks about how every time something like that happens, Osarobo later must go back to where he once began learning: "the C-major scale and the bass line for a simple blues" (Ibid., p. 281).

He is told, once more:

Not yet.

Osarobo reappears and asks Richard for work one more time. They arrange one more piano lesson, but the young man disappears again after Richard's apartment is robbed. The context suggests that he may be the responsible one, even if some doubt remains. Richard tries to reach him many times and says that, if Osaboro has something to tell him, he will wait for him at Alexanderplatz. They make an appointment, but he does not go. After that, "Richard weeps as he hasn't wept since his wife's death." (Ibid., p. 308). In the relationship between the retired German and the 18-year-old Nigerian without a future, the novel, McHugh-Dillon (2018) points out, "pushes Richard and the reader to observe the boundaries of genuine emotional engagement, the willingness to recognise someone as a human

[108] Richard also bought him a roll-up keyboard as a Christmas gift, thinking he could make some money with it on the streets, but realized how an "unworthy thought" it was (Ibid., p. 209).

rather than a type, even if that type is a ‘good’ or ‘deserving’ refugee.” She continues with an important question: “would Richard himself (unfaithful, driven, distant, rational, controlling) make it into such a category?”

In February, the Foreigners Office decides that Italy has the legal responsibility for refugees’ asylum applications: 476 people have to go. Erpenbeck does not just say this number but lists some of their names and characteristics, and repeats, for each one, the sentence “has to go” (Ibid., p. 312-313). The author then writes only one question in a whole page: “Where can a person go when he doesn’t know where to go?” (Ibid., p. 314). She repeats the same on the following page: “Where can a person go when he doesn’t know where to go?” (Ibid., p. 315). Twelve exceptions are made from the 476 cases, three are Richard’s friends: Tristan, a six-month exceptional stay; Ithemba, a four-week exceptional stay; and Rashid, a six-month exceptional stay. Life keeps being deferred. The church arranges an apartment for seven, a boat for other fifteen, a makeshift shelter for eleven, community rooms for others. African friends with residency in Berlin help. But they are too many and it is not easy to find everyone a place to stay. Richard decides to shelter some of them on his Persian rug, under the piano, on air mattresses, on the living room’s sofa and in the guest room. His friends are also involved and shelter others in a wood stove, in the backroom of a shop, and even in their own apartments. They try to organize donations, since now refugees don’t receive any money from the state, but it is also not so easy. The Berlin Senate still pays for their German lessons, but who has the will and energy to learn German on the edge of deportation?

> In the evening, everyone reassembles in Richard’s kitchen when the meal Ithemba has cooked is on the table. He gratefully accepted Richard’s offer of food money, saying he can manage the shopping on fifty euros a week. At first Richard was always given a separate plate, knife, and fork, while the others stood around the kitchen table eating together from a baking sheet. Now he eats as they do, tearing off a piece of the cooked rice-flour or yam dough Ithemba has heaped on the baking sheet and dunking it in the “soup,” a thin stew made with vegetables and sometimes with meat, sometimes with fish. It tastes not terribly differently from his mother’s goulash, maybe better. If there’s some soup left over at the end, you can always scoop up the last bit with your hand. Has he ever eaten soup with his hands before? (Ibid., p. 323)

Some of Richard’s rhythms of life and sense of order have changed. In the novel’s last chapter, he celebrates his birthday for the first time since his wife died.

For the party, he buys food not in *Kaufhalle* but in the African supermarket, veal and lamb sausages, all halal. The guests are Richard's old friends and his new friends, some of whom now live at his place and help him organize everything outside, where they sit together. At this moment, Richard is the one who gets asked questions. He tells about his relationship with his wife and the hard things both have gone through, and we realize the sense of order in his life was only a sense. It is starting to become warm again, but a campfire is still needed when the evening comes.

4.5
Redrawing a gate

"When an entire world you don't know crashes down on you, how do you start sorting it all out?" (Ibid., p. 62). How does one recover voice and make the world livable after an experience of violence that dissolves meaning? Even if violence interrupts the daily course of a life, Das (2007, 2014) locates in the everyday the possibility of making sense of an event that usually has no adequate name to correspond to its brutality; an event that radically exceeds definitions upon it. In *Life and Words* (2007), she analyzes brutal events that provoked a collapse of many worlds: the Partition of India in 1947 and the murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, which led to a series of violent attacks on Sikhs by Hindus. However, the actual dates of the events don't necessarily correspond to their effects on daily lives. The book is not about these facts, but an examination of how there is a "mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary," and how people affected by violence work to give meaning to life, which is "recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary" (Ibid., p. 7).

> My interest in this book is not in describing these moments of horror but rather in describing what happens to the subject and world when the memory of such events is folded into ongoing relationships. My wonder and terror is from such fragile and intimate moments that a shared language had to be built and with no assurance that there were secure conventions on which such a language, in fact, could be founded. A possible vicissitude of such fatal moments is that one could become voiceless – not in the sense that one does not have words – but that these words become frozen, numb, without life. Thus there were men and women who spoke, and if asked, they told stories about the violence they had seen or endured on their bodies. My thought was that perhaps they had speech but not voice. Sometimes these were words

> imbued with a spectral quality, or they might have been uttered by a person with whom I was in a face-to-face encounter, and yet I felt they were animated by some other voice. Contrarily, I describe those who chose to be mute, who withdrew their voice to protect it. Thus, just as I think of the event as attached to the everyday, I think of the everyday itself as eventful. (Ibid, p. 8)

Das follows Cavell's idea of voice, which is "not speech or utterance but something that might animate words, give them life" (Ibid., p. 5). In this sense, one may say a lot but remain voiceless, while silences can show things subjects are not able to say. Silences may keep residues of language in everyday life as a form of resistance, instead of making oneself visible or audible through speech and representation. In her ethnographies with women who have gone through the Partition, Das examines how some of the abuses to which they were inflicted were so extreme that they could not be clearly uttered. One of those women, for example, could name the violence in her family, something possibly attributable to a form of life, but she had difficulty naming sexual abuses decurrent from the Partition because they put *life* itself in question. Therefore, "to put it back into words could not be done except with extreme hesitation. Hence the boundaries she had created between saying and showing could not be crossed by careless invitations to conversation such as: Tell me what happened" (Ibid, p. 92).

In the novel, Richard meets strangers and asks: Tell me what happened. When refugees respond, we can feel when they have a voice and when the words are just "numb, without life." Take Apollo, for instance. Like the narrator in Adichie's *The American Embassy*, examined in chapter 2, he refuses to tell Richard about his parents. Instead, he invents something to preserve his voice. But readers get to know something more than the horrors he has gone through, we learn about his nomad life in the desert, how sand guides the Tuareg people, the round hut where they used to live, built and taken with them everywhere they go. Take Awad, who seems torpid in his hyperbolic narrative, but whose voice can be heard when he recalls how his father took him to school, played soccer with him and taught him how to dry his back with a towel. Or Osarobo, numb when asked questions, but to whom some voice is found in the "crooked, lopsided, harsh, stumbling, impure" notes he plays on Richard's piano (Ibid., p. 147). As Das (2007, p. 94) points out, "[t]he distinction between saying and showing (…) is not simply the distinction between word and gesture. Words can show one's numbed relation to life just as

gesture can tell us what forms of life, what forms of dying, become the soil on which words can grow or not."

In the face of a violence that exceeds our capacity to define it, it is not possible to give the world meaning if not in singularities. Words may lose their soul when they are authoritative because they are inserted in an already domesticated use of terms, because there is a grammar regarding what should be said or not about certain matters. But, as Das (2014, p. 279) affirms: "Instead of the sovereign subject whose utterances carry force because they are authoritative (…), I am interested in the fragility of the subject and of the context as mutually constitutive of the work of inhabitation." Inspired by Das' ideas on the entanglement of voice and the everyday, I end the chapter with two more stories of Richards' encounters with refugees, Karon and Rashid, to think about inhabiting a crashed world after violence. In this case, to examine how unmaking refugeeness is not a simple matter of erasing a category. It nevertheless can be found in small daily moments of singular lives, when subject and context are put in relation, in the work of inhabitation. While they wait, in the "urgency of the 'now'" of life that could not be paralyzed by the "not yet" of the law, Karon and Rashid have singular fugitive moments when they are not the typical refugees. I hope the chapter ends as an invitation for the following ones, in which the unmaking of refugeeness by unbecoming refugees is highlighted.

*

Like Awad, Karon is from Ghana, "a safe country of origin," although his story pretty much refutes this classification. Karon tells Richard about his miserable life, working in abusive conditions since he was eleven years old and hardly seeing his family, for whom he needed to provide after his father died: "I could only stay with my family for one night, the room was too small," he says it five times.[109] In 2010, he gave his mother all his money and went to Libya, where, after months

[109] Richard's first encounter with Karon in the accommodation center is narrated when, already at home, the German remembers the man's thin figure sweeping the second floor and hears his voice just after their long conversation. Karon's detailed storytelling of his life in Ghana and subsequent migration is intertwined with Richard walking around the rooms at night, drinking a beer, moving the furniture, and being haunted by the voice and the figure of the thin man as if he were at his place: "Richard would like to turn out the light and go to bed. But he remains sitting until the thin man has finished sweeping under the sofa and the secretary, he waits until he's taken the chairs back down from the table and put everything neatly in its place" (Ibid., p. 137).

working to pay the smuggler who took him to Tripoli, the war broke out. Then he went to Italy, Finland, Italy again, then Germany. The same war separated Rashid from his wife and, in his case, literally forced him to leave with his kids. They were put in a camp, then on a boat, and died in a shipwreck. Born in Nigeria, Rashid had left before from Kaduna to Agadez and then to Tripoli, he also repeats it many times during his telling. His son was almost three, and his daughter was five years old, he again repeats more than once. The repetition of Karon and Rashid's utterances indicates an effort to give the proper weight to the dimension of their tragedy, as if words, at some point, could finally say what they should say. It is one of the many ways, seen in this chapter, in which Erpenbeck narrates the insufficiency of violent stories, the lack they leave for the ones telling them. Despite that, most of them keep telling them in some way or another in stuttering, hesitance, repetition, confusion, overload of information or just through silences. Rarely simply answering direct questions.

"Some of these scraps of sentences Richard is hearing now sound familiar (Ibid., p. 230)," he had heard them before from other refugees. At the same time, each one has their own singular life, one that is now partially interrupted. Through Rashid, for instance, Richard gets to know details about Eid Mubarak, the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. More precisely, he learns about *Rashid*'s Eid Mubarak: "My father always bought fabric for Eid Mubarak for all the women in our family, and another fabric for the men: me, my brothers, and nephews. In the year 2000, it was a blue fabric. This blue robe is what I was wearing *that day*, and a cap" (Ibid., p. 103). *That day* was the day when an attack after prayer killed his father, the day when no traditional lantern parade happened in Kaduna, Nigeria, the day when no family ate together in a tidy house prepared for the end of Ramadan. In their first conversation, Richard learns about Rashid's routine with his parents and ten sisters, how they would line up to get money for lunch and were taken by a truck to school. Later, Rashid studied metalworking. "In the year 2000, the fabric my father bought for our Eid Mubarak robes was blue" (Ibid., p. 106), he says, in one more of his repetitions. After they talk, Richard buys flowers for himself for the first time in his life.

*

When Richard decides to buy land for Karon's family in Ghana, he enters a whole new world in his own city, Berlin. Following Karon's instructions, he takes cash to a hidden place, "and in the middle of the room an African woman, her hair in wild disarray, sits on a three-legged stool, before her in the linoleum floor is a crevice from which vapors are rising" (Ibid., p. 268). The novel describes a strange environment for Richard: a foggy room with a colorful wall, people around the African woman with her eyes half-shut. He gives her an envelope with the money, three thousand euros for two-and-a-half acres, and the woman throw it into the floor's hole. "Will I at least get a receipt or something? And then the woman begins to laugh" (Ibid., p. 269). Karon receives a paper with codes for his mother to get the money in a village in Ghana. It is all very weird and confusing for Richard. But Karon, a man for whom a café is a strange environment, feels comfortable in the foggy room. He can become visible there.

"Here in this place, Karon knows his way around, and for a moment he's no longer a refugee, he's a man like any other" (Ibid., p. 269). No, Karon is not a man like any other, but there he is definitely not a refugee.

*

Months after their first conversation, a Muslim and an atheist get together for Christmas. Rashid is Richard's only guest. The Olympian, the "Thunderbolt-hurler," who has led protests in Berlin and tried to light himself on fire when the Foreigners Office determined they all needed to go back to Italy, Rashid talks about his comfortable life in Tripoli, in a house with three bedrooms and a shop where he worked as a metalworker. He used to take his kids to school, Ahmed and Amina, who played in his shop's courtyard in the afternoon. In the evenings, Rashid cooked for the family: "my son was allowed to eat from my plate," he says, just as he used to do with his father (Ibid., p. 229). The day when he was caught and sent to a camp with his kids, he had just built a last large metal gate for a driveway. He talks about his work with attachment, as if his voice was stuck there.

> After a rather long pause during which both men stare at the black TV screen as if there were something to see, Richard says:
> Could you draw me a sketch of that gate you'd just finished working on that day?
> (…)
> Then he draws, corrects, goes on drawing, until Richard can clearly recognize what the gate looked like that Rashid had built for his final commission in his life as a

metalworker, a gate that surely still guards the entrance of some property in Libya. And in the end I put the design in the middle. If you could see me doing my work, says Rashid, whom Richard has always called – with perfect justification, he sees now – the thunderbolt-hurler, if you could see me doing my work, you would see a completely other Rashid. (Ibid., p. 233)

When Rashid redraws the gate, he is also no longer a refugee, I would say.

5
Uncanny encounters as the heartbeat of an occupation

> *Mas o instante-já é um pirilampo que acende e apaga. O presente é o instante em que a roda do automóvel em alta velocidade toca minimamente no chão. E a parte da roda que ainda não tocou, tocará em um imediato que absorve o instante presente e torna-o passado. Eu, viva e tremeluzente como os instantes, acendo-me e me apago, acendo e apago, acendo e apago. Só que aquilo que capto em mim tem, quando está sendo agora transposto em escrita, o desespero das palavras ocuparem mais instantes que um relance de olhar. Mais que um instante, quero seu fluxo.*
>
> (Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*)[110]

A sequence of façades with graffiti tagging opens the feature film *Era o Hotel Cambridge* (*The Cambridge Squatter*, 2017), directed by Eliane Caffé. The low-angle shots capture them pointing to the sky. Some windows are broken, others covered by wooden panels; a red flag hangs in one of them. The sound of cars, buses, ambulances and horns intensifies, and we hear the buzz of street vendors and people walking. Some leave and enter old buildings. The camera approaches the wicket of a red door behind a grid and, already inside, shows pipes on the surface of peeled-off colored walls, the sound of water running through, and the mesh of wires in improvised electrical connections. There are lights behind the doors, spread

[110] In Stefan Tobler's translation for the novel's 2012 English edition, which keeps the original title *Água Viva*: "But the instant-now is a firefly that sparks and goes out, sparks and goes out. The present is the instant in which the wheel of the speeding car just barely touches the ground. And the part of the wheel that still hasn't touched, will touch in that immediacy that absorbs the present instant and turns it into the past. I, alive and glimmering like the instants, spark and go out, alight and go out, spark and go out. It's just that whatever I capture in me has, when it's now being transposed into writing, the despair that words take up more instants than the flash of a glance. More than the instant, I want its flow."

through the myriad of floors revealed by the camera in the stairwell. Almost all the scenes of the movie are played inside this building, which actually used to be a hotel named Cambridge before being abandoned for a decade and later occupied by homeless people in the center of São Paulo, Brazil.

Someone opens the wicket and greets a man in Portuguese, even though he said something in another language. Ngandu (Guylan Mukendi), a black man whose skin is even darker than the ones inside, and an older white woman, Gilda (Suely Franco), enter the building and sign a book in the lobby, which controls who comes and goes. When they go up, another man carries a bed frame down the stairs, speaking in Arabic to a Brazilian woman, who does not understand it. "Hassam, you are not in a camp in Jordanian," she says, in Portuguese.[111] Hassam (Isam Ahmad Issa) also speaks some Portuguese, we get to know it when he introduces a newcomer, Kalil (Qades Khaled Abu Taha), to Gilda: "He is a Palestinian, who has just arrived from Yarmouk's camp in Syria. He doesn't know anything, not even a word." Gilda pulls the newcomer and goes up the stairs with him, looking fascinated. In a couple of minutes, we have a clue of the polyphony that extends throughout the entire film and the types of encounters and frictions it brings.

When the movie begins, the building is not only occupied but nurtured as home by different people, Brazilians and *refugees* – this is how all foreigners are called there, even if they might have different official statuses. They live in the place, take care of it on their own and struggle for the right to keep it as their home, facing the threat of eviction. In *Era o Hotel Cambridge*[112], there is an initial contrast between *refugees* and *Brazilians*, citizens who should have the legal right to a home in the country. Despite this opposition, they were all homeless, which is why they all ended up there, creating alliances and building a community together. That does not happen without conflicts, which, as it becomes clearer with time, exist not only *between* Brazilians and refugees but also *among* Brazilians and *among* refugees with many origins and personal stories. These conflicts relate not only to cultural

[111] All the quotes from the movie are translated from Portuguese to English by me, except when noted.

[112] Even though the movie was released abroad with the title *The Cambridge Squatter*, I opt to maintain its original name (whose literal translation would be *It was the Cambridge Hotel*) to make it clearer when I am referring to the movie and not to the squat in general. The original name also keeps the memory around the place in the present. Lins and Batista (2020, p. 24) note that in the film, the name "Cambridge" only appears in the final credits and when a kid who lives in the occupation watches a recording made for *Cambridge TV*, created in the squat.

and regional differences but also to gender, age, personal experiences and positions in a political movement with organizational rules. Through a permanent tension between those differences and a common cause, through encounters and estrangements, the movie pictures relational beings who build transversal and affective alliances, which are not merely based on cultural identities or nationality and sustain the collective struggle for housing.[113]

The Cambridge Hotel existed as such. It had luxury rooms, a restaurant, a bar and a beauty salon when it was opened in the 1950s in Avenida Nove de Julho, in São Paulo, first with the name Claridge Hotel. During the second half of the century, urban development transformed the city center into an area of transit and noise, fostering people, stores, hotels and restaurants to move to other neighborhoods, especially in the 1990s. Due to the urban changes that took residents and tourists away from the center, the Cambridge Hotel was closed in 2002; only its bar hosted parties until 2004. Abandoned for almost a decade, and expropriated by the municipality due to debits, it was occupied in 2012 by homeless people, refugees among them, who were part of Movimento Sem Teto do Centro (MSTC), or Downton Homeless Movement, a division of a wider housing movement in São Paulo, Frente de Luta por Moradia (FLM), the Housing Struggle Front. It was still popularly known as the Cambridge, though, and after years during which the residents renovated the building, which was falling apart, it was finally integrated into a federal program for social housing. Its renovation was completed in January 2023, an achievement that is not in the movie, which was released years before.[114]

The residents and leaders of the social movement participated in the pre-production of *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and in the film's cast, together with professional actors, such as Suely Franco and José Dumont, and actual refugees, who in total speak five languages. *Era o Hotel Cambridge* is nevertheless a work of fiction, even though it would have not been possible without the actual lives in

[113] The initial idea of the director Eliane Caffé was to make a film about a personal story of a refugee until she saw a news report about a building occupied by homeless workers in São Paulo. She says: "The connection was immediate: what do most Brazilians have in common with the greatest part of refugees? The lack of home, the lack of right to a safe and stable place to balance the soul and the family and bear the daily chaos." (Caffé, 2017, p. 235, my translation)

[114] In a book published in 2017, just after *Era o Hotel Cambridge* was released, Carmen Silva, one of the leaders of FLM, actress and character in the movie, said that over 140 families lived in the building of the former Cambridge, including over 240 children (Ibid., p. 33). The renovated building has 121 apartments, most of them kitchenettes.

the squat. The plot focuses on the 15 days between residents receiving a fictional order of eviction and the actual day of the eviction. In this period, we follow not only what would be the most predictable activities of a structured movement that struggles for housing, such as assemblies and the internal administration of the occupation, but also the crafting of personal relationships, disagreements over small and big issues, celebration, romance, humor and desperation.

Life in the Cambridge squat is also one of the three parallel narratives of the novel *A Ocupação* (2019), by Julián Fuks, translated from Portuguese to English by Daniel Hahn and published in 2021 as *Occupation*.[115] Sebastián, the narrator, goes there for the first time to visit one of the residents, Najati, who had called him after having heard that Sebastián writes "about exile, about lives adrift, about trees whose roots are buried thousands of kilometers away" (Fuks, 2021, p. 12). Najati was a refugee from Homs, Syria, exiled in São Paulo, "although nobody had authorised the word for him, he didn't expect the solemnity of exile, as he lacked the official designation," (Ibid.) the narrator says, pointing out to the specificity of feelings that names such as *exile* or *refuge* evoke. Sebastián returns to the occupation at other moments, starts to spend time in one of its empty rooms, and tries to approach the intimacy of the lives there.[116] At some point, towards the end of the novel, he is finally face-to-face with Carmen Silva, one of the leaders of the social movement. She tells him:

> I know you've spoken to some of the residents, I know you've been trying to understand who they are, what they do, what brought them to the occupation. Do whatever you like, talk to whoever you want, that's your right. But you should know it's useless. If you want to understand this place, best to forget about the personal journeys, the private lives. If you want to understand this place, best not to lose sight of the collective, best join us in the struggle. Come round to the party on Sunday, come well rested, bring something to eat and a few items of clothing (Ibid., p. 61).

The "party" to which Carmen refers is the act of occupying an abandoned building, one of the regular actions organized by the housing movement. Even those who already have a place to stay, like the Cambridge's residents, act together,

[115] All quotes from the novel are from the English edition of the book, published by Charco Press.
[116] The writer Julián Fuks has spent some months in the occupation during an artistic residency organized by Juliana Caffé e Yudi Rafael after *Era o Hotel Cambridge*'s footage. Visual artists have also participated in the project: Virgínia de Medeiros, Ícaro Lira, and the duo Jaime Lauriano and Raphael Escobar.

guaranteeing a strong collective presence so that other homeless people have a new roof and are not easily evicted by the police. But before the party, and for the party to happen, there are the everyday collective alliances that both novel and film also don't lose sight of. In *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation*, the housing struggle is crossed by encounters of love, memory, pain and humor by Brazilian citizens and non-citizens. There is no hierarchical distinction between the logic of the plot that guides the actions of the social movement and the logic of apparently minor commonplace moments. The indistinction is characteristic of the aesthetic regime of arts (Rancière, 2004). This chapter departs from these narratives to destabilize the category of the refugee through the focus on relationships and alliances, without disregarding the material and legal implications of being attributed the status of refugee or asylum seeker. In more general terms, it keeps the aim of this dissertation to examine, through the making and unmaking of the figure of the refugee, the permanent tension between the stakes involved in representation and the possibilities of acting politically.

The first section of the chapter analyzes the collective formations shown in both the movie and the novel through the common cause of the housing struggle. It highlights the condition of displacement and precarity that both Brazilians and refugees share, which makes some Brazilian residents in both narratives consider themselves "refugees in their own country." I gather the Cambridge squatters as "transnational precarious nomads" (Fassin, 2018), a term that challenges the strictly legal and national categories of migration and creates another way of looking at different individuals who nevertheless share common understandings of the world. Both movie and novel pay attention to the structural conditions that fostered their characters to leave and seek asylum but relate them to journeys of desire existent under a form of life related to precarity and displacement. The narratives go beyond an experiential commonality and privilege lives "under the form" (Ibid.), with their singularities and imaginations, even when considering the specificities to be legally a refugee or an asylum seeker, which have concrete consequences in how people move through life.

As the second section of the chapter analyzes, citizenship statuses still matter and have consequences for how refugees resist. This dimension helps us rethink political agency not in terms of an "act of citizenship" (Isin, 2002, 2008) or a moment of political rupture but in an extended temporality and an unstable

relationship of non-citizens with time and visibility, in which a "descent to the ordinary" (Das, 2007) is privileged. This analysis does not mean praising any invisibility that might reinforce the refugee as a pure and non-excessive figure, as analyzed in chapter 3. The political challenge is, as argued in the initial chapters, to escape the binary between recognition and anonymity, or visibility and invisibility, and look for ways of naming that question given modes of representation but also don't simply refuse it. That is a challenge faced by the stories analyzed here.

With long and complex narratives that are able to explore the relationship between collective formations and singularities, *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation* show that alliances between citizens and non-citizens are not only based on a common cause, as it might initially seem. As the third section of the chapter examines, encounters are sustained by "uncommon estrangements" (Ahmed, 1999), or the sharing of a loss, even if people's loss was not shared before as a common culture or identity. The section does that first by analyzing the estrangement of *Occupation*'s narrator in intimate relationships with his father and wife, which reinforces the constant transformation of familiarity and home and the possibility that one feels at home when away. Second, by thinking about the possibility of building communities before any identification of origin or nationality is given, as exemplified by the relationship between Gilda and the Palestinian refugee Kalil in *Era o Hotel Cambridge*.

The last section of the chapter focuses on the movie *Era o Hotel Cambridge* to explore the role of imagination in politics. While the film was created with the real world inspiring fiction, one of its main themes is the bringing of imagination to reality. That is symbolized by the vlog created by the residents during the two weeks before the eviction day, whose scenes highlight the essayistic tone of the movie. In a theatrical environment, with different lighting and colors, the vlog brings an affective and imaginative instance that helps sustain everyday hardships. The movie's formal choices are intrinsic to its content and to the framing of the political subjects and their alliances. They contribute to de-essentialize people usually separated into different political categories, helping to reexamine political belonging in terms that are not constrained by spatial and national imaginations.

5.1
Who are the refugees?

When Carmen Silva calls all residents for an assembly at the beginning of *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, there is a clash between Brazilians and refugees. A lawyer (played by Manuel del Rio, one of the founders of FLM) announces an eviction of the occupation planned to happen in 15 days and that he will appeal against the judicial decision. Carmen Silva is a character played by herself. She is actually one of the main leaders of the organized struggle for housing in São Paulo, and in the movie she plays a fictional Carmen. The eviction and the scene of the collective meeting are the script's creations, even though inspired by actual assemblies organized by the actual residents, with Carmen's character occupying the leadership position. During the meeting in the film, a Brazilian man says they can't take care of refugees if they can't even handle the Brazilians who live in the Cambridge. Hassam reacts: "I am a Palestinian refugee in Brazil. You are Brazilian refugees in Brazil," a statement at which Brazilians laugh and scream. At this initial moment, the strangers are clearly non-Brazilians. But Carmen agrees with Hassam: "Brazilian, foreigner, we are all refugees; refugees from the lack of our rights. Now it is time for us to share tasks and organize ourselves."

The dialog disturbs the usual evocation of shared humanity praised by sentences such as "we are all refugees" or "we are all immigrants," usually heard by citizens in solidarity with non-citizens. Here, Carmen and Hassam point to a shared lack of humanity, showing that humanity may be kept as a promise even for those with formal citizenship. Instead of a vague commonality that erases material inequalities, these are informed by a specific one: the lack and the struggle for housing. It encourages alliances between people who don't speak the same language, don't share the same beliefs, don't eat the same food but all take refuge inside the Cambridge and work to make it their home. In the novel *Occupation*, Carmen also points to the commonalities between "militants and refugees" – she does not use the word Brazilians – "because that's what we are, it doesn't matter which land you're in. They want to have us be tramps, they want to have us be bandits, ragamuffins, paupers, they want us to lack everything, country, land, a house to live in, a bit of ground to die on" (Fuks, 2021, p. 19). She goes on, pointing to a gained strength when they all consider themselves refugees, a *refugeetude*, as

Nguyen (2019, p. 111) calls "an experiential resource for developing significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world."

> That's their mistake: they don't know we are all of us refugees, they don't know how much strength refugees have for maintaining their grip on the rock, how deep their roots of exile go. So they can all start getting ready, because a flower is going to grow out of the concrete, and that flower is red. (Fuks, 2021, p. 19)

Carmen and Hassam's statements reproduced above, which could be merely empty protest words, gain concreteness throughout the movie and novel. As residents of a squatted building, they all had to leave their houses at some point in life and face the fear of having to leave them again, as indicated by the eviction order. They share not only a provisional home but also an overall feeling of provisionality. In this sense, then, Brazilians who occupy a building together with non-Brazilians can also be considered "transnational precarious nomads," a term used by Fassin (2018) to gather people who move in conditions of inequality, be they refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and also documented ones who nevertheless carry the potentiality of deportation or share other conditions of precarity due to their displacement. In the Cambridge, even if many people strictly lack the dimension of moving from one country to another, they are in constant displacement trying to build a home for themselves, and their position of transnationality is performed when they share their home in a building with people from different nationalities, whatever they might be.[117]

Many residents in both movie and novel have migrated from the Northeast of Brazil.[118] But they have also come from other Brazilian cities, like the woman who narrates one of *Occupation*'s short chapters telling why she has left her house in the North of Brazil and ended up in the Southeast:

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[117] Even though the Cambridge has always had immigrants as residents, many refugees who act in the movie did not actually live there but shared similar housing problems, brought up in workshops during the film's pre-production. The collaborative process of filmmaking has fostered the creation of Grupo de Refugiados e Imigrantes Sem Teto (GRIST), or the Homeless Group of Refugees and Immigrants in São Paulo. The group now integrates FLM and Frente Independente de Refugiados e Imigrantes (FIRI), the Independent Front of Refugees and Immigrants. (Caffé, 2017)

[118] The movie does not tell Carmen Silva's personal story but in the 1990s, she escaped domestic violence and left her eight children in Salvador, Bahia, Northeast Brazil, to try a new life in São Paulo. She says that she felt a cultural shock when arriving in the city, where she did not find a job and, after some resistance, went to one of the housing movement's meetings. She participated in her first squatting in 1997 (Ibid., p. 251-253).

> You ask why I've ended up here, I couldn't tell you, all I can tell you is why I left there. Arriving at the bus station, I had no place to go, I went into the metro and followed the crowd because I had nobody to follow. My life was a void, made up only of what no longer existed. It was Carmen who got me off the street on those first tough nights in São Paulo, it was the movement that got that dead woman out of me. The fact is, I just got tired of being occupied, by men, by rats, by maggots. Now it's my turn to occupy, don't you think? Rosa, my name's Rosa. (Fuks, 2021, p. 41)

The house where Rosa used to live first had an infestation of rats that made a loud noise running in the PVC ceiling lining. After she called someone to poison them, rats started falling down and appearing all over the place, and what followed was an infestation of maggots. They proliferated everywhere: in her furniture, her objects, her arms, and even her face. Her story ironically inverts public discourses of "invasion" or "wave" of immigrants, placing migrants as those who have to leave because they are the ones – literally, in this case – invaded, occupied. It is a migration story, but one from Aragominas, in Tocantins, to São Paulo. These are two Brazilian cities separated by over two thousand kilometers and a bus ride of over a day, a piece of information the novel does not tell readers. The length of the journey is less important than the precarity that led Rosa to move, but also the will to move, to occupy and not only be occupied.

5.1.1
Building a 'we': forms of life and lives under the form

In *Life: A Critical User's Manual* (2018), Fassin argues that anthropologists have usually studied lives and life stories as a way of analyzing social, political and religious structures, practices, and institutions, instead of treating "life itself as an object of knowledge," as a proper category of the social sciences in the same way as kinship or myths, for example (2018, epub, preamble, page unidentified). Even though recent research has focused on the subjective and objective dimensions of individual lives, they are still not exactly "anthropologies of life," Fassin states, but anthropologies of life sciences or life experiences (Ibid.).[119] In his own search for

[119] According to Fassin, some projects have been trying to change this state of affairs by framing "that which constitutes the singularity of human life, namely the tension between biology and biography, and the belonging to social and cultural worlds that are always specific" (Fassin, 2018, epub, preamble, page unidentified). He identifies three of these projects, which he calls phenomenological, ontological and culturalist, respectively represented by researchers such as Tim Ingold, Eduardo Kohn, and Perig Pitrou.

an anthropology of life, Fassin writes *Life* as an essay about the "moral economy of life in contemporary societies" (Ibid.): the creation, circulation and tension of values and affects around life, which change and compete through time and also show contradictions when are thought either in abstract or in regard to concrete lives. Fassin proposes to face this tension through three dimensions: forms of life,[120] or the relation "between the specific modes of existence and a common condition of humanity"; ethics of life, the "sacralization of life as a supreme good"; and politics of life, which shows the contradiction between an abstract and a concrete evaluation of life (Ibid.). Together, the three dimensions reveal the inequality of human lives, crucial in Fassin's framing of the matter.

Proposing an exchange between philosophy and anthropology and acknowledging the difficult task, Fassin unites refugees, asylum seekers, documented and undocumented migrants under a form of life that he calls "transnational precarious nomads." Differently from Butler's (2004) concept of precariousness, which is an ontological condition, Fassin (2018, epub, chapter one) defines precarity as "the condition of those exposed to the inequality, discrimination, injustice, or persecution that threaten this existence." Based on ethnographic research in France and South Africa, he affirms that even if those migrants' experiences are unique, there are also fundamental similarities that make them share a common understanding of the world: precarious situations in their home countries, such as persecution and poverty, but also in their host countries, such as bureaucracy, police controls, fear of deportation, insecurity, and the persistence of poverty (Ibid.). Be they in apparently very different contexts such as the "Jungle" refugee camp in Calais, France, or in squatted buildings in the Central Business District of Johannesburg, South Africa, they share not only material dimensions of precarity, lacking resources, but also prejudice, state repression, and a sense of provisionality common to housing occupations that are independent of the concrete reasons for having left their countries and may deem irrelevant the differences in legal categories such as economic migrants and refugees. Although Fassin recognizes the importance of legal categories, he acknowledges that they are not static. Migrants frequently move from one to another and blur them in their daily lives. They are also seen and treated differently, by others and by themselves,

[120] Fassin departs from Wittgenstein's account of forms of life but also builds on Canguilhem and Agamben to examine the concept.

independently of these legal categories, rendering their distinctions insignificant in many concrete situations. In Fassin's words:

> Beyond the difference in historical and political contexts, the young Syrian men in Calais and the young Zimbabwean women in Johannesburg share a common form of life. It is the form of life of wandering strangers who have left the country of their citizenship because their very physical existence was under threat and who are maintained in an untenable legal and social precarity by the country in which they found refuge but where their rights are not recognized. (Ibid.)

The term challenges the strictly legal and national categories of migration and creates another way of looking at different individuals who nevertheless share common understandings of the world, related, in this case, to displacement and precarity.[121] I betray Fassin's definition and include the Brazilians who live in the Cambridge squatter as transnational precarious nomads.[122] Besides the fact that many Brazilian residents of the Cambridge have lost a home and had to move, sharing the displacement-precarity dimension, they are *transnational* because they share a cause and build a life with nationals of other countries. The *trans* of the term transnational, which indicates a relationship between different nationalities, is frequently under-analyzed, while the otherness of nations that are not our own is highlighted. In the Cambridge squatter, the community is transnational because it is built and extends itself across different nationalities, also among Brazilians.

That does not mean there are no important material differences between Brazilians and foreign transnational precarious nomads determined by nationality and citizenship status. Material and legal conditions shape stories of displacement and have consequences on people's lives and possibilities of inhabiting the world. They can turn people into "foreigners among the foreigners" (Balibar, 2004, p. 63) if we consider homeless Brazilians as *foreigners* by being deprived of basic citizenship rights, or "refugees in their own country." The novel and the movie show common conditions of precarity and displacement between Brazilian citizens and non-citizens but also highlight structural forces that foster refugees'

[121] Fassin's formulation correlates to Sayad's concept of migration as a social system sustained by a material or symbolic relation of domination between the country of immigration and the country of emigration (Sayad, 2004, p. 162-163). According to this approach, migrants' positions in a social hierarchy defines their condition, not their legal status (Sayad, 1998, p. 267-268). In the case of Brazilians who live in the Cambridge, that social hierarchy is experienced inside their own country.
[122] In an interview, Carmen Silva says that arriving in São Paulo from Bahia made her feel like "a refugee in her own country" (Gama, 2020).

displacement and have consequences in their ways of acting politically in the new country, as the next section shows. Unlike Najati, for example, Rosa was not arrested nor had to leave the country on a boat. The Syrian man had to face different risks in his violent separation from home: "Najati was a refugee, one of five million Syrians now abroad. One of the many wandering the world with their hands over their ears, he said, their hands blocking out the noise of the bombs exploding in the distance, which never stop exploding" (Fuks, 2021, p. 12).

In *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, both Ngandu's and Hassan's migration, perceived by them as inevitable, are related to colonialism and transnational economic exploitation. A scene connects Ngandu's personal life to the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Ngandu enters his room and scrolls his phone looking at personal photographs on his mobile phone: a woman with a baby, young people sitting on the grass or in a classroom in what seems an old time in the DRC. As Lins and Batista affirm (2020, p. 15, my translation), "these photographs root the occupation in the historical world, by referring to a past that is incorporated into a place through the subjectivities that are now part of it." These more intimate images are followed by documental scenes, whose different visual texture creates an estrangement if compared to the previous ones. They show workers pilled-up inside a mine while a voice in English relates the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, Congolese businessmen, the exploration of minerals for the making of mobile phones and the purchase of guns. In Hassam's case, there is not even a state from where to escape; as a Palestinian, he never belonged to one.[123] "Homeland is that anonymous which we are completely unaware of. Since we are born we, Palestinians, are outside of it. We grow up from one exile to another. And from an illusory peace to another," says Hassam in Arabic, while we see documental images of an arid camp full of tents, also with a different texture from the ones filmed inside the Cambridge.

Structural causes prompting migration are stressed but, importantly, never in a simplistic way that renders characters void of desire and imagination. The aesthetics and the montage of different kinds of images reinforce the complexity of the relationship between personal lives and historical events in *Era o Hotel*

[123] The uniqueness of the Palestinian case led to the creation, at the end of 1949, of *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees* in the Near East (UNRWA), which is independent of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Cambridge. The mixture of the scenes filmed in the occupation and the documental images exemplified above – the arid camp, the workers in a mine, which have a particular visuality – add an essayistic stance to the fiction, which also reverberates at other moments, as we will see below (Lins and Batista, 2020).[124] It creates a doubt in the spectator if the documental images relate to the characters or to other refugees, if they are real or imaginary. There is a suggestion that Ngandu was dreaming, as he wakes up after the images of the mine. In Hassan's case, an ambiguity is added by his poetic tone of voice, to which we listen while he remains in a static posture of contemplation, smoking and drinking coffee, and also by the fact that he appears in one of the documental scenes of the camp, evoking a possible remembrance.[125]

In the novel *Occupation*, Najati also perceives his migration, prompted by political persecution, as forced. But in telling his story of precarity and displacement, the novel privileges the impact of homely objects that help one make a sense of oneself, showing that an estrangement, a process of becoming strange, had already taken place in Syria. It reinforces the sense an out-of-placeness that can affect people in their own country: Najati was a refugee even before leaving. "In Najati's texts Syria was not there to be read, at first the war was not there to be read, or the destruction, the greatest ruin in its historic scale. It was in the everyday trivialities that the vastness of the misery was revealed" (Fuks, 2021, p. 27). In the autobiographical stories written by Najati and read by Sebastián, the refugee recounts, for example, the dispute in prison for a smuggled soap he had managed to bring among his medicines and how he would wait until everyone was sleeping so he could take a shower with it; or the second-hand objects and household goods sold in a market in Homs, where he imagines his "old fridge, light yellow, large, with two doors" (Ibid., p. 28):

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[124] The scene of the miners is from the documentary *Blood in the Mobile* (2010), by Frank Poulsen, about the production of cassiterite in mines, sold to Europe to produce cellphones, and finance the war in the DRC. The scene in the camp is from the documentary *A Chave da Casa* (2009), by Paschoal Samora e Stela Grizotti, which shows Palestinians in a refugee camp in Iraq two days before they leave for Brazil. Even if we do not know this while watching *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, the different textures of the images reinforce the polyphony of the movie's narrative, as Lins and Batista (2020) stress. For the spectator, the images are clearly of a different kind.

[125] Isam Ahmad Issa, who plays Hassam, was among the refugees filmed in the documentary *A Chave da Casa*, through which the director Eliane Caffé got to know him.

> These are the belongings of many Sunni families who've been plundered by the regime, especially those families whose members had protested in favour of freedom, they are the objects that populated all those destroyed houses, the destroyed memories, the lives. The Sunni refrigerator is the symbolic synthesis of the Syrian question, here the narrator turns grandiloquent, it's the most concrete expression of the systemic eradication of the Sunni people. (Ibid.)

Importantly, then, even when pointing to structural causes of refuge, the film does not erase its relationship to the singularity of experiences. Moreover, the dimension of forced displacement comes together with another one of desire, which inspires transnational precarious nomads to rebuild their lives and occupy spaces, just like Rosa did, going from Aragominas to São Paulo. In *Occupation*, Ginia, from Haiti, is tired of always being asked about the earthquake and remembering the trembling, the force from below, the screaming of a whole city. She tells Sebastián about a greater tragedy than the earthquake, colonialism, and how enslaved people in Haiti rebelled to be free. Then she has a request for the writer, who collects stories for his book: "[P]ut something more than pain, something more than misfortune, if you want to write something worth writing" (Ibid., p. 54). Ginia knows that telling her tragedy won't recover anything. It will be useful for Sebastián, not for her:

> Now everybody wants to know about our misfortune, about nothing but our misfortune, so long as it's expressed with sensitivity and grief, with the least possible amount of rage. Is that what you want for your book? You want me to lend you my distress, my pain? (Ibid., p. 53)

All constraints suffered by transnational precarious nomads don't erase their desires and possibilities of building personal relationships; of living and not only surviving. Life resists and insists under a specific mode of existence, a form of life. Focusing only on the precarity-displacement dimension or on the degree of force related to it runs the risk of moralizing migration and forgetting that, besides what is shared in a form of life, there are lives "under the form." There is a permanent tension between singular lives and the conditionalities of the form of life. Fassin also refers to transnational precarious nomads as "forced nomads" in order to highlight the objective conditions that affect the displacement of supposedly voluntary migrants. As argued in chapter 2, I prefer to avoid the term forced migration and stress the subjective dimension of migrants, whose conditions of displacement and precarity can nevertheless be perceived by them as forcing them to move. In this sense, even if there is a forced dimension in the movement of

characters, they are also "voluntary migrants" if these are the ones to whom desire is ascribed. Both movie and novel are able to complexify the dispute between forced and voluntary that still circumscribes the categorization of mobility, exploring the tension between subjection and subjectification and bringing singularities of transnational precarious nomads to the fore. As Fassin states,

> […] refugees and migrants manage to maintain a certain margin of liberty through which they can deploy tactics and play with the rules. Even in the most extreme circumstances, refugees and migrants find solutions to the problems they face, negotiate arrangements with local agents, develop solidarities, imagine futures – and strive to rebuild a normal form of life. (Ibid.)

Das affirms that *form* is usually privileged over *life* (2007, p. 15-16) in analyses of forms of life. As seen in chapter 4, she examines how a critical event interrupts the flux of daily life but is nevertheless anchored and assimilated into everyday experience. Das is interested in the discursive possibilities of recovering and inhabiting a crashed world again, not as a supposed capacity of transcendence, but for the persistent and daily exercise of remaking one's own life. She focuses on the singularity of lives under the form, concerned with the "slippery relation between the collective and the individual, between genre and individual emplotment of stories" (Ibid., p. 2). That slippery relation is, I argue, the strength of both *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation*, which manage to relate the collective and the individual with the contradictions and conflicts that this relationship brings to both dimensions, instead of a binary clash between them. They combine the amplitude of the event to the particularity of individual trajectories instead of separating them.[126] In the case of transnational precarious nomads, the shared macroconditions of displacement and inequality, which render them vulnerable, are at the same time where singular lives can be found, in daily politics of connection, through different objects, clothes and colors existent in every

[126] As Das notes, talking about Strathern's view about social relations in fieldwork, there is no need to oppose macro and micro scales, but to establish a perspective in framing the world: "First, (…) concrete relations that we establish in living with others are like shadows of the more abstract questions – that is, we learn about the nature of the world in the process of such living. Second, (…) we cannot assign a scale to patterns of sociality independent of perspective. Indeed, to be able to establish a perspective is to enlarge the field of our vision. *The question, then, is not that of part-whole relations but of establishing the horizon within which we may place the constituent objects of a description in their relation to each other and in relation to the eye with which they are seen. One might also express this in terms of the relation between subject and the world*." (Das, 2007, p. 4, my emphasis)

room in the Cambridge. If Carmen Silva advises Sebastián to not lose sight of the collective to understand the squatter, the narrator/novel also does not forget the singularities of lives that happened to be together in there and approaches them even if in a fragmentary mode. The politics of aesthetics of both film and novel lies in relating the collective and the "individual emplotment of stories," and not only in showing a common political cause.

As Fassin (2018, epub, chapter one) states: "Under the form, life remains." That perspective privileges a "politics of life": "a shift from the singular to the plural – from life in general to lives in particular" (Ibid., chapter three). It allows for a move from an abstract evaluation of life, which underlies moral and humanitarian concerns about migration, to an evaluation of actual lives, revealing the inequalities in the treatment of different peoples. Regarding the theme of this dissertation, to find the singularity of lives under commonalities of forms such as transnational precarious nomads work to unmake refugees as a non-excessive figure and treat them as neither pure victims nor reified national-cultural groups.

5.2
The 'party' and/in the everyday

In both *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation*, Carmen Silva calls the residents for a new "party," which means, for them, the squatting of another empty building. They won't move there since they already live in a squat. But they will join others who still don't have a home so they can collectively resist any removal attempt. Their struggle, after all, has not ended when they occupied the Cambridge; it exceeds the individuals who come and go, sometimes for a very short period of time. In the movie, the moment of the party is one of the few times we see the streets of São Paulo, at night. Carmen is the hostess: "Go in! Go inside your home! It is your home. This is your home!," she energetically says to people who get off a bus and move towards the building, whose entrance has just been breached by the occupants. The interior is in ruins, but people immediately know what to do. They connect wires to get electricity, they clean. "I am tired of this life of being a cleaner for the government," a woman ironically says while sweeping the floor. The description of a similar event in *Occupation* evidences why it is called a party. There is an attainting enthusiasm when it is set forth, a euphoria showed by "arms

almost raised, shouts contained, all the imminence of movements announced in the vibrating of the bodies" (Fuks, 2021, p. 71). The visual effect of the bodies together is highlighted by the novel's description of the gathering in the Cambridge's lobby, the walking of 300 or 350 people and the physical occupation of sleeping mattresses forming "a mass of similarly uneven bodies" (Ibid., p. 74).

The party, the moment of occupying the abandoned space and taking it for themselves, is a moment of claiming rights. It can be considered an "act of citizenship," a concept that tries to detach citizenship from its legal framework, working on the role of the excluded in transforming notions of political belonging (Isin, 2002, 2008; McNevin, 2006; Nyers, 2006; Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Aradau et al., 2010). Taking a performative stance of rights, it locates citizenship in the *act* as a political activity from non-citizens, the mobilization of those who in principle were not authorized to mobilize. Isin (2008, p. 16) tries to differentiate an act from "the status and habitus of citizenship" in the contemporary context of intensification of migration. Through an act of citizenship, the transformation of "forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political" is achieved by "bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle" (Ibid., p. 39). It is an act through which people, be they legal citizens or foreigners, form themselves as political subjects in claiming rights. Citizenship is necessarily performed in the act. According to this notion, in the case of the squat, subjects are formed as the bearers of the right to have a home at the very moment of the occupation, which actualizes the act of citizenship. Framed by Butler (2015, p. 80), who does not use the term acts of citizenship, "[t]he right comes into being when it is exercised, and exercised by those who act in concert, in alliance."

Following the intensive research on acts of citizenship in the first decade of the 2000s, and committed to stressing the agency of migrants in light of the reinforcement of mechanisms of control and movement restriction of racialized migrants – people who are *made* migrants (Tazzioli, 2019) – critical migration studies have focused on forms of visibility of migrants' struggles, like demonstrations, squats and collective mobilizations in public places (Nyers, 2011; Squire, 2011; McGregor, 2011; Rygiel, 2011; Tyler and Marciniak, 2013; Darling, 2014; Johnson, 2014, 2015). Without denying the importance of non-citizens

claiming rights, I depart from the novel and the movie analyzed here to question if acts that imply agency as rupture, as a transgression of norms, is a proper way of approaching the struggles of transnational precarious nomads. Through both narratives, I problematize the notion of "act of citizenship" for mainly two interconnected reasons: a temporality that places politics in the moment of rupture; and the focus on visibility, while non-citizens' resistance very frequently means, as seen in previous chapters, managing (in)visibility. Differently from what the concept of acts of citizenship implies, it is exactly because the status and the practices of citizenship cannot be completely divorced that visibility is not always a possibility for non-citizens. Their acts have different material consequences from citizens' ones (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Tazzioli, 2019).

First, there is a temporal dimension of an act that doesn't tackle the connection between acts and the formation of subjectivity (Mezzadra, 2015).[127] In *Occupation* and *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, the general act of claiming the right to have a home is actualized by the specific action of occupying abandoned buildings in São Paulo. But the act as a disruptive moment in the order of things is not possible without a *before*, without social and political conditions and collective political subjects formed in time. The formation of subjectivity implies a temporality that doesn't conform itself to the act, and refugees/migrants' struggles, like many other political phenomena, don't remain attached to the event. When focusing on the daily building of alliances, which also implies constant conflicts, the narratives analyzed in this chapter do not remain focused on an event, but on a process of collective formations that are affective and reinforced in the everyday. In both narratives, the scene of the party only happens by the end. When the film and novel begin, there is already an occupation. And even if the announced eviction of the Cambridge happens, new occupations will continue to take place, as indicated by the final scenes of the movie showing the flags of social movements in the façades of São Paulo's buildings.

[127] This temporality is related to the exclusionary aspect of citizenship that remains in the concept of acts of citizenship, whose moment of rupture draws a limit between those who are enacted as actors, or activist citizens, as Isin (2008) calls them, and those who are not. Even differentiating an act from the status and habitus of citizenship, Isin recognizes the maintenance of an exclusionary stance of formal citizenship when the act produces "citizens and their others" (Ibid., p. 37).

According to Rees (2019, p. 80), while the event is usually thought as a single moment,

> [it]is not simply the 'thing' that happened because it cannot be separated out once and for all from the power relations within which it occurred and the reception it received. (…) [T]he event must be approached in its processual sense as a 'turning point' that occurs at the level of the political, resulting in material change in the state of 'things.'

As Rees argues, Isin is not clear about the conditions for an act to disrupt order and result in a politically transformative event. A processual view of the event is important to challenge the notion of sudden rupture implied by an act of citizenship, but is a material change in the state of things always recognizable? While I agree with the argument that "making the act the primary object of analysis obscures the longer term political practices that make real change possible" (Ibid., p. 94), I want to problematize the meaning of "real change" in the case of migrants' struggles. Darling (2014, p. 88) defends a focus on moments of interruption with a "longer term commitment to political becoming", since "there is a recognition that political acts may be prosaic and yet still alter a perceptual field in some way, rather than demanding that such acts only ever be revolutionary in nature and effect." Movie and novel manage to show a series of moments of political interruption such as assemblies, occupations and resistance to eviction that are connected to everyday activities and create the conditions for transversal and transnational alliances to be formed. Especially in *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, it is clear that the functioning of the squat depends on an order, many times a rigid one: there are rules of entrance and participation, an organized commerce, a collective bakery, and coordinators for each floor of the building.

Second, and relatedly, besides the temporal dimension of the act, focusing on the moment of rupture implies privileging a politics of visibility, which simplifies the ways in which migrants negotiate (in)visibility according to possible but not always predictable political outcomes. In the first assembly shown in *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, Kazongo (Pitchou Luhata Luambo), whom we later get to know is from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is worried because according to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Geneva Convention), refugees cannot participate in political acts. He is afraid of being deported, while Brazilian citizens could be evicted and even arrested, but would still have the right

to stay in the country. His and other non-citizens' active participation in the political organization may have specific implications for their survival.[128]

As Kazongo's example shows, "legal status and material conditions highly shape the ways in which subjects can and do resist, as well as the modes of action they mobilise" (Tazzioli, 2019, p. 137). The status of citizenship still matters. The insistence on the act as a producer of the actor leaves the concept of citizenship under-analyzed. Formal conditions of (non)citizenship are not erased in the rights-claiming; on the contrary, they have concrete consequences for Kazongo and others. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) point to this paradox in the concept of acts of citizenship when it separates practices from statuses:

> It seems paradoxical that while citizenship studies tend to trace disconnections and drifts between practices and statuses of citizenship, for instance, in the claims of noncitizens (Isin 2009, McNevin 2006), it is precisely this moment of disconnection that seems to provide the impetus to reinstate the citizen as the political subject par excellence. Moreover, what needs to be remarked is the *inability of many practices identified as practices of citizenship to secure or hold in place any kind of citizenship status*. (Ibid., p. 257, my emphasis)

For illegalized migrants or refugees, being visible can, in some cases, relate to risk and vulnerability, even though that is not always acknowledged by the own rigid political structure of the social movement shown in *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, which follows a logic of visibility to gain recognition. As a condition to live in the squat, all residents must not only help to maintain the place but also participate in organized collective meetings and take part in the decisions about the housing struggle as well as public demonstrations and occupations. At some point in the movie, Magaly (played by Magaly Silva, also an actual leader of FLM) tells Hassam that if Kalil does not participate in the "base group" he cannot stay there anymore, even if he does not understand a word of Portuguese. There are requirements to be part of the group, which allow it to function not only as a home for hundreds of people but also as a social movement. Life in the squat is conflictual.[129]

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[128] Despite his fear, Kazongo states, aware Brazil signed the 1951's Geneva Convention: "We are indeed a problem of Brazil." We don't know if the foreign transnational precarious nomads were already recognized as refugees or are waiting for asylum procedures in both the movie and novel.

[129] There was actually resistance inside the MSTC to finding different ways of bringing refugees to the movement. Interviewed by the art director Carla Caffé, Carmen Silva says that, before working in the movie, the principle of not excluding anyone made her not look to refugees' specificities: "We could not understand why they were so withdrawn. We would only demand: Take part! Take part!" (Caffé, 2017, p. 259, my translation). Carmen also recognizes the degree of prejudice that Brazilians

Moreover, while an organized movement like the FLM depends on a concerted alliance, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants' presence is frequently less stable, more temporary.[130] In this sense, their collective subjectivities may be closer to what Tazzioli (2019) calls migrants multiplicities, or "migrants who temporarily assemble together in a certain space, often building tactical alliances" (Ibid., p. 17). The concept contrasts with Butler's notion of assembly, which implies a more organized collectivity with specific goals of recognition (Ibid., p. 142). Even if we find both in the Cambridge, it is important to understand that the dimensions of precarity and displacement of transnational precarious nomads give rise to collectivities that are frequently temporary and heterogenous, formed by people that just happen to be together in a certain place and struggle to improve common conditions. This view not only de-essentializes migration but also disturbs more common ideas of political participation and agency, exactly because of migrants' "uneven visibility and fractured relation to time" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p. 41-42):

> "[M]igrant struggles force us to question and rethink both the paradigm of political agency and the presumed temporality of political practices. Thus, rather than depicting (illegalized) migrants who mobilize politically as the paradoxically truest manifestation of 'active citizenship', it may be more productive to reconceive the political in terms that are no longer reducible to citizenship as such (De Genova 2010). Similarly, the temporality of political practices is usually understood in terms of a process of claims-making, with its insurgent moments, followed by one or another (negative or positive) institutional resolution. Visibility, agency, and collective public mobilizations cannot be the yardsticks for assessing the political stakes of these struggles. In particular, the uneven visibility and fractured relation to time that undocumented migrants play with – due to their 'irregular' presence in space – are two features that can facilitate a rethinking of migrant struggles."

Some of these struggles depend, as Butler (2011) states, on previous material supports, found, for example, when new refugees arrive at the Cambridge or other occupations already functioning. What I want to highlight here is that, beyond the organized social movement that struggles for housing, there are in parallel more unstable collectivities in time and space, whose visibility cannot adequately capture how they act politically. Therefore, a strict focus on moments

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in the squat had towards refugees and the stereotypes related to nationalities, such as Nigerians as drug dealers and Palestinians as terrorists, not very different from the xenophobic public comments registered in the residents' vlog shown in the movie.

[130] Many just happen to be there by chance, like *Occupation*'s character Demetrio Paiva, a Peruvian man whose life was in motion from one city/country to another until stopped at the Brazilian border.

of rupture and public demonstrations can overshadow fugitive instants that are not so easily recognized but are nevertheless an important political dimension of the everyday. Many refugees' struggles don't happen according to the coordinates of the politics of representation or the moment of rupture implied by an act of citizenship. They are also in the supposedly pre-political formation of subjectivity, in the "everyday practices by which migrants continually come to terms with the pervasive effects of the border" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p. 13).

The narratives analyzed here mix different temporalities: of the plot regarding occupations and evictions and the *instante-já,* the "instant-now" Clarice Lispector refers to in her 1973 novel Água Viva. The "instant-now," which Lispector privileged in her whole work as a writer, brings to the fore supposedly minor and commonplace experiences that do not fit in the chronology of historical facts. With a hierarchical indistinction between "instants-now" and moments of rupture that claim for recognition, the narratives rearrange the perceptible field of politics. Between their beginning and end, filling each of the plot/clock's tick-tock (Kermode (2000 [1967]), there is an interval organized and humanized by a contingency of encounters, discussions, celebrations, love and friendship. There lies the film and novel's politics of aesthetics (Rancière, 2004, 2012).[131]

The everyday is not a given for a squat, it requires a lot of work. People need to constantly remake it, even after the building is clean and not just ruins anymore. Their everyday, in this sense, is also a "party." Their everyday is eventful (Das, 2007). As Das (Ibid., p. 7) states, while "relationships require a repeated attention to the most ordinary of objects and events, (…) our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than a descent into it." When focusing on the ordinary life that happens in between events such as assemblies, occupations and resistances to evictions, *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation* highlight "the creation of new meanings and practices of belongingness, everyday life, and politics as well as of new imaginaries of hope that

[131] Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 254-255) argue that for Rancière, "politics only exists in the temporality of the 'event,' of the 'singularity of a political moment' that 'interrupts the temporality of consensus." Nevertheless, Rancière does not only focus on the moment of rupture but analyzes the conditions of possibility for a consensus to be broken. Moreover, for him, "the heart of politics" is a permanent renaming, it is "the dispute concerning the relations of words to things" (2004, p. 40). Unsurprisingly, Rancière's work is evoked both by the literature on acts of citizenship, which privileges visibility, and by researchers who defend a politics of imperceptibility, such as Papadopoulos et al. (2008).

go beyond the battle over citizenship" (Martignoni and Papadopoulos, 2017, p. 39). That implies a temporality of continuities and discontinuities rather than ruptures and, consequently, a view of agency that is not necessarily emancipatory but crafted through sometimes-invisible practices. These practices don't necessarily imply the search for visibility or the claim for rights, since many times migrants' struggles "consist in the mere fact of persisting in a certain space, irrespective of law, rights and the pace of the politics of mobility" (Casa-Cortes et al., 2014, p. 42).

A refugee like Kazongo, for whom participation in the occupation involves the risk of being deported, is still struggling even if he opts to remain publicly invisible. As chapter 2 exemplified through Chimamanda Adichie's short story *The American Embassy*, political visibility may be exactly the cause of one's decision to leave and ask for refuge in another country, influencing others to refuse to speak. That was also the case with Najati, the main non-Brazilian character in *Occupation*. A scene recorded on his cellphone shows the "crime" of the Syrian man, who participated in a political demonstration and had to leave his wife, two sons and a daughter: "Najati in the middle of a circular plaza, atop an improvised stage, surrounded on all sides by a huge crowd of brightly colored flags, nodding heads, arms raised to applaud him after each ever more intense line" (Fuks, 2021, p. 13). He was arrested and later released on the condition that he would leave the country.[132]

The analysis that visibility cannot be the main parameter for an approach of agency and resistance does not mean a romanticization of invisibility/ imperceptibility. In chapter 3, I argued against the idea of disidentification, of becoming imperceptible, as a possibility to escape power's apparatus of capture. In their plea for an "outside politics" to oppose the policing of representation, Papadopoulos et al. (2008, p. xii) rightly argue that "events are never in the present" because only in retrospect can one identify them as transformative. They defend a

[132] The novel's narrator indicates that part of Najati's journey was of panic crossing the sea but, uncomfortable with reproducing his tragedy, hesitates on telling it lengthily: (…) "of the story that followed, what I have retained is mostly the bitter taste of the tea he offered me. It didn't seem reasonable to ask for sugar in the middle of that narrative, interrupting him as he described the persistent blows that left their marks on his body, the panic of the other men, in the dead of night, as they crossed the vast sea in a tiny boat. I don't know why it seems reasonable for me to interrupt him now, mentioning the tea, mentioning the sugar, and not to ask myself whether the sharp furrows I could see on his face, wrinkles like deep rivers, were not marks from the same ill-treatment, and whether that same panic wasn't still hidden in his eyes beneath those drooping lids." (Fuks, 2021, p. 13)

focus on fugitive practices that make people's present time, those "employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such" (Ibid.). While I also propose looking closely at this navigation of daily life, which sustains social transformation in the long run, I suggest here that these practices are named even if fugitively, and need to be daily negotiated with the fixity of institutional names.

As argued in chapter 3, if practicing escape, refugees make sense of it. The symbolic dimension is not separated from their bodies (Sharma, 2009). The idea of "outside politics" also risks turning the migrant into a figure, reinforcing the imaginary around refugees as non-excessive, voiceless victims, as seen in chapter 2.[133] Besides that, if the status of citizenship still matters, recognition still matters. Acts of rights-claiming such as occupying empty buildings still matter. Again, the question is how to circumvent the language of (in)visibility and challenge dominant representations without just refusing them. It is, as Athanasiou well puts it, "surviving recognition as 'that which we cannot not want'" (Athanasiou and Butler, 2013, p. 78-79).[134] Is it possible to find other modes of being present and naming that are not restricted to the logic of representation but might negotiate with its inescapability?

In conversation with Butler, Athanasiou talks about the dialectic of presence/absence that goes beyond visibility as a claim for recognition and inclusion. Can one be present, appear, without resorting to visibility? In the Cambridge squat, citizens and non-citizens form what Athanasiou calls "spacing appearance," a space enacted by present bodies, in which the "space should by no means be taken as synonymous with fixity, but rather implies a performative plane of 'taking place'" (Ibid., p. 194).[135] In the narratives, the body that is kept in private, which does not appear, is not a precondition for the political body that appears in occupations and public mobilizations. The body, usually relegated to a pre-political

[133] An anecdote from the initial research for the film illustrates the humanitarian discourse that disregards the complex negotiations between visibility and invisibility. The director Eliane Caffé tells that when visiting Caritas, a Catholic organization and one of the main institutions responsible for the reception of refugees in Brazil, one of its directors said that the idea of showing refugees in a squat could only happen in fiction. According to him, refugees, avoiding any possibility of political conflict, would never live in one. Some months later, the news and the visits of the film crew to occupations in São Paulo showed many families of refugees living there (Caffé, 2017, p. 236).

[134] The formulation relates to Spivak's (1993) reference to liberalism as "that what we cannot not want."

[135] Athanasiou proposes a different formulation of Hannah Arendt's notion of "space of appearance" to highlight the importance of performativity instead of the fixity of the place.

sphere, is indeed political in what would be the private space, in spacing appearances, contact zones, and relationships that allow so many different people to live and create together. These people are not nameless bodies. They can eventually decide to be visible and demand recognition proper to the logic of citizenship.[136]

5.3
The Cambridge squatter as a borderzone

In *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, the connection of non-Brazilians with the worlds they left behind when migrating is symbolized by the computer room, where they speak with relatives and friends, share news, argue and celebrate through video calls. It is in this room where we see Ngandu's conflict with his brother, who accuses him of having left his wife and son. It is where we hear accounts of the war in Gaza told by Hassam's sister, "3200 people without a home," while seeing destroyed buildings behind her. Brazilians accuse refugees of monopolizing the space at some point, but also share moments of beauty, such as when many gather around a computer attracted by the singing of a Colombian woman on the other side of the screen. The video calls extend subjects' worlds beyond the concrete building, showing that the "network of subjectivities harbored by an occupation is not restricted to its residents, including their affective relationships kept through the available means of communication" (Lins and Batista, 2020, p. 17, my translation). The room works as a boundary to revisit places they have left and to bring them in.

Besides the computer room, the whole Cambridge ends up being a borderzone where different people relate and *estrange* each other. These estrangements are in great part related to cultural and national differences that can divide Brazilians and refugees: a language that is not understood, habits that are unknown and trouble relationships, like the one between Ngandu and a Brazilian woman, who have different notions of dating.[137] Nevertheless, in different ways,

[136] The organized movement also negotiates its moments of visibility. The windows of many occupations in São Paulo, for example, used to be covered by wooden siding, something that has only changed after the making of the movie. Carmen Silva says: "the windows nowadays are opened, and we took this experience to other occupations. Our desire for permanent protection was very radical." (Caffé, 2017, p. 255)

[137] In the movie, one of the main cultural estrangements is the romance between Ngandu, Congolese, and a Brazilian woman. They are in his room when she puts her hand over his. He takes it away and says they need to be boyfriend and girlfriend first, and she needs to pay him for that. She makes a

novel and film are not restricted to the estrangement with cultures, nationalities, languages. That is fundamental to de-essentialize the *refugee* as a self-standing category.

In the next two subsections, I analyze how each narrative shows us a non-binary relationship between familiarity and strangeness, with the help of Sarah Ahmed's analysis of the affective dimension of home and her notion of "uncommon estrangement." In *Home and Away* (1999), Ahmed explores the potential for estrangement in what is supposedly the most familiar space of home. She does not argue for an ontological condition that equals migrants and non-migrants but, in recognizing that one can feel at home when away and feel strange at home, she opens the possibility for migrants to create a community not based on a shared loss of identities, a common past, an origin. Below, I first explore the feeling of being strange at home by *Occupation*'s narrator, Sebastián; then I examine the possibility of building communities before any identification is given, exemplified by the relationship between Gilda and Kalil in *Era o Hotel Cambridge*.

5.3.1
Unfamiliar home

Occupation's narrator, who lives in a private apartment with his wife in São Paulo, does not feel part of the Cambridge, even after spending much time with the other residents. Since arriving at the building for the first time, Sebastián feels strange. He is not part of the "we." Throughout the novel, the narrator explores the ambivalence of a building that is not a hotel anymore but has some grandiosity, and of bodies living in what he sees as ruins but are also imposing. "There was no longer a hotel, and yet its doors hid an infinite number of bodies that were just as solid as my own, through their doors seeped almost inaudible voices, voices that came to me on the move, voices that kept me in motion" (Fuks, 2021, p. 11). Despite his discomfort, Sebastián insists, and there are moments when he even feels "part of that gathering of atypical militants" (Ibid., p. 18). He keeps visiting the building

surprised face at what seems an absurd condition. Ngandu explains that, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one must give the other a present if willing to date. Later in the movie, he appears with a gift for her. She laughs and wears the blouse Ngandu gave her. "You are very beautiful," he says. She asks him to translate sentences into French, such as "I am very happy with the gift," and he asks her if she has a boyfriend and needs care. We hear the dialogue while seeing them taking time to kiss, touch and look at each other.

even not understanding very well why, "why I was trying to camouflage my too-white skin in a blush, why, from what, I was taking refuge in that non-existent hotel" (Ibid.). Face-to-face encounters animate him, and he sees himself going up and down the stairs that "seemed to encourage encounters that were slowed down, and thus more alive, as if in sharing the same breath people saw themselves as sheltered from haste, from a lack of interest, from indifference" (Ibid, p. 32).

Nevertheless, his feeling of not belonging intensifies by the end of the novel, when he joins the residents in a "party," the act of occupying an abandoned building. "Stripped of the collective, I lost the shamelessness of the plural, I existed in myself alone, listening to the tension in the voices, looking at the apprehensive faces" (Ibid., p. 72). He cannot share the same fear with others because he is not at risk as they are. He does not relate to the names of former residents written on the walls. Moreover, he doubts the struggle, its rationality, its coherence. He sees only debris, ruins, "a building that was an invalid, dead, nothing but an empty carcass" (Ibid.). Preta, one of the leaders of the movement, sees Sebastián's astonishment while she eats mulberries in the middle of chaos, and turns to him:

> You don't get it, do you? You think all this effort is for nothing, for a dirty plot of land, for a building that's falling to pieces. You don't know what this place was like the first time we occupied it, you don't know this was the house of life itself incarnate. I was a child, you can't imagine how many memories I've got of this place, how many nights I come back to this garden, not in shadows like this, to a garden that is bathed in sun. Those dreams never show the misfortunes, the day they took all the families out, without any of the threats like they're making today, with the notorious promise to transform everything into low-income housing – the day when life ended up under the flyover. My mother is doing the right thing, Carmen's doing the right thing, not to give up on this place. Promises or threats, it's those men who choose their weapons: our weapons, our bodies, will always be more vital. (Ibid., p. 73)

Sebastián is the intruder, not any foreigner, because he is not really occupying the space, taking place, but is there to observe and write stories or steal them, as he says. But the narrator's feeling of estrangement – in this case, related to class and race and not really to nationality – is not restricted to the squat; it also pervades some of his closest relationships for different reasons. *Occupation* has three parallel narratives, all related to the occupation of bodies and from bodies: the illness of Sebastian's father, the pregnancy of his wife, and life in the Cambridge. At the hospital, the body of Sebastián's father seemed too big, swollen, because the

air he breathed would escape from the lungs and spread under his skin, but the son resisted recognizing a body different from the one he knew all his life. The transformation in his wife's body, who receives their baby, an "intruder," also changes what had been a stable relationship, in which all movements seemed to be controlled until they are not anymore: "Perhaps we had become illiterate in the language of our intimacy" (Ibid., p. 67).

Father, wife, and squat are different kinds of estrangements. As Ahmed (1999, p. 344) states, "[e]strangement is always an estrangement from a particular place and time." Opposing Dillon (1999)'s conception of estrangement as "what we all have in common," Ahmed nevertheless recognizes the potential for estrangement at what is supposedly the most familiar space of home. With this move, she reconceptualizes home as a space that can be rebuilt and felt even if one is away from it. Interchanging three different narratives, *Occupation* juxtaposes the estrangement in the unfamiliar squat with other estrangements in the narrator's intimate life, in what would be his familiar home, even if they are of a different kind. It shows that at home we already find strangeness; at home we are also dependent on others, fragile (Ahmed, 1999; Kotef, 2010).

> To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel and fail to feel. (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341)

In a letter to writer Mia Couto reproduced in the book, the narrator and author confound, he is not Sebastián anymore. Julián tells the writer that even his father and wife have become strangers to him. Estrangement also comes together with movement and change, which in the novel are in great part shown through the transformation of bodies and the expectation of a life that may be lost or a new life that may be born. But this change that leads to estrangement also fosters curiosity and makes the narrator know his father and his wife differently. "Would that not be the opposite of intimacy, that being so intimate we find each other predictable, indifferent, and no longer look for each other in the shadow of our own thoughts?"

(Fuks, 2021, p. 82). Even if the distance from his wife bothers the narrator, it also makes it possible that the couple is "able to go back to experiencing the delights of difference, the pleasure of friction, the bliss of strangeness" (Ibid., p. 22). Wasn't it also this type of bliss that, after all, kept him going to the former Cambridge Hotel?

Occupation destabilizes home as the space to which one can always return to find familiarity, it de-essentializes home as a place of total belonging and, consequently, allows for an unfamiliar place to possibly become home. If strangeness is not an objective feature of an essentially different world, but a process of estrangement is feasible even at home, it is also possible to divert from it, even if not permanently, and find commonalities with what might appear otherness, away from home. The narrator's sense of not being part is not immutable; it comes and goes in different ways, not least because it is also unstable for those who more obviously belong to the occupation and struggle to go on. For transnational precarious nomads, a constantly materially threatened community must be built and rebuilt every day.[138] For Sebastián, nothing is really threatened, so it might be harder to feel part of the collective. But, as he keeps going and lets indecipherable people occupy him and his writing, he can go outside his own domains. He is again part of the "we," even if for some moments, when he sees others bring life to what for him was a ruin – "nothing else I'd seen before deserved that name" (Ibid., p. 75) – in the recently occupied building. The energy feeds his love relationship back.

> Occupying was an imperative for all those people, occupying the squares, the streets, the empty buildings, populating them with their still solid bodies, with their uncontainable lives. Occupying was a matter of urgency for bodies, converted into the bluntest of political acts, confronting the resignation of those who are more serene. Occupying, even if it was in order to be among many, to exist yet again as part of the collective. My own imperative might have been a different, albeit impossible one: to turn myself into a square, to turn myself into a street, to turn myself into an empty building, so that whatever's uncontainable about life might come to occupy me at last. (Ibid, p. 78)

[138] That is clear in the following excerpt of *Occupation*: "And then, making us all equal in our silence, Carmen began to recount an ancient night, recalled by so many here, when everything they had was devastated, when a construction of years collapsed to the ground in a matter of hours, under the weight of uniforms and nightsticks. Or rather, the building remained standing, static, empty, indifferent, and what collapsed to the ground were the two hundred families who lived there, fleeing out onto the avenue with their mattresses on their heads, spending the early hours of that morning, and the next mornings, and the next, under a flyover crowded with people." (Fuks, 2021, p. 19)

5.3.2
Uncommon estrangement

When focusing on personal relationships through food, humor, romance, party and creative meetings, besides the most obvious political activities of the struggle for housing, *Era o Hotel Cambridge* also explores uncanny encounters beyond a more immediate connection or clash between cultures and nationalities. I choose here to focus on one of those, the relationship between Gilda and Kalil, the Palestinian newcomer whom the woman gets to know when she enters the building with Ngandu in one of the movie's first scenes, described at the beginning of this chapter. Gilda is a character who brings some disturbance to the Cambridge, even if we don't really understand what goes on with her. She is out of place, and that is loudly said when Carmen Silva tells Gilda's nephew, Apolo (José Dumont), that he needs to stay with her while the others leave to occupy a building: "She risks our safety." Since the beginning of the film, Gilda seems attached to Kalil and wants to teach him words in Portuguese. We don't know much about him, only what Hassam tells us: he has just arrived from Yarmouk's camp in Syria. Kalil also disturbs the order of the occupation, which, as it gets clearer during the movie, has strict rules to be able to function. Hassam is frequently warned – sometimes in front of Kalil, who does not understand the message – that he cannot receive his "household" there. We don't know if the two men are actually related, but it is through Hassam, also Palestinian, that Kalil is informed about the rules.

An affective scene epitomizes the relationship between the two out-of-place characters. Wrapped in a blanket, Gilda calls Kalil, who tells her it is time to go to bed. He enters her room. Everything around them is dark, we can only see both faces very closely, in a theatrical scenery. We hear a drop falling repeatedly as if there was a leakage. Gilda points to an old piece of newspaper with a picture of an elephant and says: "A female elephant, Babás. Repeat: Babás." The Palestinian does it as if it is just a new word in Portuguese: "Ba-bás." Gilda continues and explains that she used to take care of Babás – give her food, brush her, talk to her – when she worked in the circus, except for the day when she was sick and could not go. "Then someone else was sent. Babás didn't like this person, got furious and ran away desperately. My Babás was taken and condemned to death. A terrible death," she says. Kalil looks at her attentively and nods his head, even without

understanding Portuguese. Gilda goes on: "You did not come here by chance, you came here to make a son in this womb that will give birth to the reincarnation of my Babás," she tells him, and begins to unbutton her shirt. He stops her: "Be calm, Gilda." She cries a lot, and Kalil sings a lullaby to calm her down while holding her tight. Even if the song is in Arabic, we hear him repeat "Gilda" many times.

The Palestinian is away from his home, Gilda is away from her home. They both connect through an untranslatable excess, a sharing of pain that is both in the woman's desperate narrative and in the man's silence. They relate not because of what they have once shared and was lost, but by sharing their lack, by what Ahmed (1999) calls an "uncommon estrangement." Their relationship is not only forged through commonalities but by sharing what each other has lost: **"**It is through the very loss of a past (*the sharing of the loss, rather than the past as sharing*) that the 'we' comes to be written as Home" (Ibid., p. 330, my emphasis).

Referring to a community of Asian migrant women writers, Ahmed (Ibid.) shows how they connect not merely because they identify as Asian/ migrant/ women/ writers. These categories are a point of departure for them to make sense of their migration paths and question back these own categories that would supposedly gather them almost naturally in a community because of pre-given identifications. Sharing their lack through writing, they show that their community is in a constant process of being built and rebuilt:

> [T]here is no shared terrain of knowledge which is presupposed by the gesture of identification. What is at stake is not (…) a 'sudden recognition of kinship,' through which an automatic 'community of strangers' can be established (a common estrangement or commonality through estrangement). Rather, there is a void or an absence: indeed, other migrants are already known as not known; they are assigned a place as strangers before the identifications can take place. In other words, it is through an *uncommon estrangement* that the possibility of such a migrant community comes to be lived. The gap between memory and place in the very dislocation of migration allows communities to be formed: that gap becomes reworked as a site of bodily transformation, the potential to remake one's relation to that which appears as unfamiliar, to inhabit spaces and places. This rehabitation of the migrant body is enabled through gestures of friendship with others who are already known as not known (strangers). It is the role of community in the recreation of migrant selves that is so important. The community comes to life through the collective act of remembering in the absence of a common terrain. (Ibid., p. 344)

As far as we know, Gilda is a Brazilian citizen, but in the film she represents someone who is out of place and has to be taken care of while others act in the

struggle for housing. She is "already known as not known." It is important to stress that Gilda's condition is not equated to refugees'. There is no ontological condition of being out of place that is shared by all and makes them equal. It has been already highlighted that the narratives analyzed here do not ignore the legal and material specificities of non-citizens and that those are crucial for considering the implications of refugees/migrants' agency. But through the relationship between a character who does not say coherent things and another who does not understand a word of Portuguese, the movie stresses the possibility that the "already known as not known" relate, make alliances and form communities in ways that exceed the belonging to readily understandable nation-states and cultures. Importantly, their strangeness is not normalized, but dealt with. The strangeness of the stranger is kept. Something of the experience of an intrusion remains (Nancy, 2000, p. 2).

In the fictional world of *Era o Hotel Cambridge*, the relationship between Gilda and Khalil indicates that strangers are not only found at the border, as Ahmed (Ibid.) reminds us; or, better said, it shows that the border is not where it is supposed to be. The borderzone is not only between the Cambridge and the world outside it; it is the Cambridge itself. The Cambridge is also the skin that embraces one another, sometimes forming "a mass of similarly uneven bodies" (Fuks, 2021, p. 74). The embrace is at the same time a mode of differentiation between bodies, which turns the "we" into an ongoing process of making and remaking. The relationships in the Cambridge, the crisscrossing of storylines, work to thicken the borderzone, to make it an opaque contact zone (Glissant, 2010 [1997]).

In exploring what is uncanny in relationships that would be familiar and predictable and the uncommon estrangements shared by characters out of place, *Occupation* and *Era o Hotel Cambridge* privilege encounters and estrangements that de-essentialize refugees as a pre-given category of analysis. The impossibility of really knowing the other requires a translation between encounters in ways to create worlds instead of turning previously defined worlds into a commensurable measure, an institutional category. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) identify translation as a crucial problem of approaching the excess of political subjectivity over categories, since it is the "moment of clash between concepts and the materiality of specific concrete situations" (Ibid., p. 271). In opposition to articulation, which aims at constituting unities, although temporary ones, translation underlies discontinuity. Mezzadra and Neilson depart from Sakai's

analysis of the two ways in which audiences are implied in acts of translation. In the homolingual address, language communities' homogeneity assures a common ground for translation. Capital works like that, authors state, because it translates different commodities, with their particularities, in a common commodity *form*, to which there is no residue.[139] In the heterolingual address, audiences are composed of people from different languages, requiring a process of translation that always leaves something behind, a residue, and needs a renewed and constant work of translation of different heterogeneous arrangements (Ibid., p. 281-282).

Heterolingual address, therefore, faces the untranslatable, what is excessive of fixed boundaries and categories, making clear that, at the same time we don't get rid of boundaries and categories, these can be constantly resignified, which makes them the own source of their contestation. Resignification works through a heterolingual translation, which recognizes the possibility and even inevitability of a failure in communication, of a resistance in signification. It generates "novel and unstable subjective formations [which] involve a radically different use of the plural first-person pronoun than that implied in homolingual address" (Ibid., p. 282). It is a plural first-person that can accommodate, for example, two persons who don't speak the same language, like Gilda and Khalil.

The encounter between Gilda and Khalil is an extreme example of translation challenges, but in the film's context, it works well to break what would be more obvious expectations of relationality across cultures and languages in the squat's borderzone. In this case, the building of a "we" does not rely on a mediator that guarantees transparency and stability, or a "universal middle term" (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 83). It is an anti-identitarian understanding of the production of subjectivities, one that does not require a master signifier and destabilizes *nomos* and space.[140] If the attempt to measure what is excessive is abandoned, one can

[139] Shapiro (1997) shows how the logic of capital erased particular values of meaning and exchange, analyzing the disappearance of Pequots from North American narratives. European traders transformed wampum, the beads used by Pequots, "from a repository of local value and an instrument of cultural transactions to a money form." (Ibid., p. 18)

[140] Sakai (1997, p. 13) summarizes the relationship between translation and subjectivity. "In respect to personal relationality as well as to the addresser/addressee structure, the translator must be internally split and multiple, and devoid of a stable positionality. At best, she can be *a subject in transit,* first because the translator cannot be an "individual" in the sense of *individuum* in order to perform translation, and second because she is a *singular* that marks an elusive point of discontinuity in the social, whereas translation is the practice of creating continuity at that singular point of discontinuity. Translation is an instance of *continuity in discontinuity* and a poietic social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. This is why the aspect of discontinuity

recognize that there is always something lost in translation, but that there is always something created as well. As Balibar (2006, p. 7) affirms, "it is precisely what makes difficult the passage from one language to another, that also makes the combined use of different languages creative and even revolutionary." If translation always involves losses, how do we translate experiences in a way to highlight the "scandal" of every translation, retaining something of the "shock of the uncanny" in it, as Chakrabarty (2008) defends when framing modernity's work of turning incommensurable things in the world commensurable?[141]

5.4
Imagination in an affective 'community of fate'

In *Era O Hotel Cambridge*, professional actors and real occupants of the building and other squats are mixed. The cast includes known actors in Brazil, such as Suely Franco (Gilda) and José Dumont (Apolo), and non-actors who have participated in acting workshops. Many of the refugees in *Era o Hotel Cambridge* are actual refugees and although they interpret other characters, their stories were also heard as they collaborated in the film's pre-production, including script, settings and costume design (Caffé, 2017). Carmen Silva and Magaly Silva play versions of themselves as activists and also took their experiences in the housing movement in São Paulo to the film. The initial version of *Era o Hotel Cambridge*'s script, written by Eliane Caffé, Luiz Alberto de Abreu and Inês Figueiró, was changed after the conversations with actors, residents, refugees, activists and even architecture students, who have helped to think the building of the former hotel as a character in itself (Ibid.).[142]

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inherent in translation would be completely repressed if we were to determine translation to be a form of communication. And this is what I have referred to as the *oscillation or indeterminacy of personality in translation.*"

[141] Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, a deeper discussion on the politics of translation is fundamental to consider ways of destabilizing political categories.

[142] The movie's art director, the architect Carla Caffé, invited architecture students from Escola da Cidade, where she was a lecturer in São Paulo, to participate in the project. They worked with the scriptwriters in the film's pre-production and helped to renovate common areas of the building, trying to reconcile the needs of the community with the ones of the film. They have reimagined the spaces and, with the help of the residents, produced new furniture made of discarded material, crafting, for example, shelves from pallets and armchairs from tires. The lobby (where assemblies happened), the computer room (which used to be the tearoom of the Cambridge Hotel) and Apolos's "theatre" (the old hotel's bar) were all created in this process. The community kept the new environments after the movie. The book *Era o Hotel Cambridge: Arquitetura, Cinema e Educação* (Caffé, 2017) documents this process of physical change in the building and also the dramaturgy

As spectators, we don't know about the collaborative process of filmmaking just by watching the film. But its crafting leaked out to be incorporated by the movie's essayistic tone. The work of fiction embodies the connection to a referent world. The own making of the film floods into the screen, becoming part of the narrative.[143] The character of Ngandu's lover, for example, is seen in different scenes as a part of the film crew: in the computer room, editing interviews of the residents, or filming assemblies or creative meetings. She belongs to the crew and is a film character at the same time. That accentuates the unveiling of a film's artificial character, which together with the juxtaposition of heterogeneous images, like the ones from the Congolese mine or the refugee camp in Iraq mentioned earlier in this chapter, privilege the instability of subject positions, in contrast to the stability of identarian categories. The movie's formal choices are intrinsic to its content and fundamental to the framing of political subjects and their transversal and transnational alliances. They work to de-essentialize people who are usually separated into different political categories, those that generally previously define frameworks of scholarly analysis. They highlight the role of imagination in politics and help us frame political theory in terms that are not limited by spatial and national belongings.

The importance of imagination is explored throughout the movie, as the chapter has been highlighting, but it is epitomized by the creation of a vlog, an audiovisual blog, *Ocupa Eu* (Occupy Me). Besides interviews, it gathers posed images of the residents: *quadro vivos*, "live pictures," which try to capture some of the "instants-now" of the occupation's flow. They are filmed by the vlog's organizer, Apolo, whom we see at different moments of the movie interpreting characters and saying poems. Apolo is a thread of imagination that crosses the

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and video workshops with residents, which helped the crew to understand the daily life of the occupation and choose people to act. The book gathers many pictures of the building before and after the squatting by the MSTC and during the filmmaking, showing care for the lives of the people involved.

[143] The making of the narrative is also present in *Occupation*, although it plays differently with self-referentiality. Written after the author's artistic residency in the squat, the novel is usually labeled as an autofiction. Sebastián was also the narrator of another novel by Fuks, *Resistência* (translated as *Resistance*, also by Daniel Hahn), in which he tells about the militancy of his father against the Argentinian dictatorship. There are two punctual moments when Julián, the author, takes the place of Sebastián in *Occupation*. One is when the father calls the son Julián, to which the writer answers: "here you've got to call me Sebastián" (Fuks, 2021, p. 58). And the other one is when a letter from writer Mia Couto is addressed to Julián, and vice-versa: the author becomes a character. The nickname of his wife, "Fê" is also mentioned, but she asks him not to use it during a conversation. It is as if the author/narrator is constantly trying, and failing, to get out of himself.

hardships through which the militants-refugees go through in the Cambridge. In the expectation of eviction, he proposes the vlog to create a memory of the occupation. The encounters to discuss and rehearse the vlog's content happen in a colorful room with theatrical scenery, an environment different from the other more neutral common areas. Residents have conversations and tell poems and stories of their lives. Apolo films them, showing the framing and proposing them to imagine scenes. When the "live pictures" are filmed, residents do musical performances in different rhythms, connected to the regions where they come from, dancing and posing together, in a dreamy atmosphere stressed by their festive clothes and the lighting and backlighting. We see them dancing and hear what sounds African drums and Northeastern forró. "The vlog is today the heartbeat of the occupation," Apolo says. There is another party besides the "party" of occupying an abandoned building, in which people can endure their hardships and form an affective community. The Cambridge squat becomes a place, as Raquel Rolnik states, in the ear of the book *Era o Hotel Cambridge: Arquitetura, Cinema e Educação*, where "one experiments and exercises the creation of a city of rights, including the right to imagine" (Rolnik, in: Caffé, 2017, my translation).

The meetings for the vlog's production also synthetize the different temporalities of "instant-nows" and historical facts combined in the film. They mix stories of the residents' harsh realities with an imaginative dimension showed by scenes in which, for example, Hassan says something poetic in Arabic or Ngandu's face is framed as if in a film inside the film. There we learn that one of the Congolese refugees tried to escape the war in the DRC on the wheel of an airplane when he was 13 years old: "I was captured and placed inside a ship's basement. I thought I was going to the United States; I did not know I was coming to Brazil." The refugee did not know where he would land, just like some of *Occupation*'s characters: Rosa, who escaped an infestation of rats and maggots and took a bus without a clear destiny; Demetrio, a Peruvian who was moving from one place to the other until stopped at the Brazilian border; and even Najati, who does not understand well why Brazil, and in the end is not found by Sebastián in the squat anymore.[144]

[144] In the narrator's imagination, Najati has returned to Syria: "(…) his return to Homs, now that the inaudible bombing seemed to have stopped, now that in his country there couldn't be a single street corner still left to be destroyed, was logical and necessary. Challenging his official exile, populating

These characters belong to what Van Gunsteren (*apud* Balibar, 2004, p. 131-132) calls a "community of fate," which, as Balibar (2004, p. 132) explains, "already include(s) difference and conflict, where heterogeneous people and groups have been 'thrown together' by history and economy." To Van Gunsteren's statement that every subject should have a place to be recognized as a "citizen," Balibar (Ibid.) then asks: *where is that place?*

> If communities are "communities of fate," the only possible answer is the radical one: *any place where individuals and groups belong*, wherever they "happen" to live and therefore work, bear children, support relatives, find partners for every sort of "intercourse." Given what I have suggested concerning the "topography" of today's globalized and cruel world, I think we could even say more precisely: the recognition and institution of citizens' rights, which practically command the development of human rights, have to be organized beyond the *exclusive* membership to one community; they should be located, so to speak, "on the borders," where so many of our contemporaries actually live. Of necessity, this means an unstable situation but also very precise demands.

The film *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and the novel *Occupation* are not restricted to showing a common struggle of Brazilians and refugees for the right to have a home. Even though this is a fundamental dimension of the works analyzed here, their strength is in showing that, for subjects to take place when occupying a building and resisting eviction, they build affective relationships in the daily lives of the occupation. The familiarity and unfamiliarity of their everyday depends not only on differences and similarities of nationality or culture, which usually come to mind when speaking about refugees. That doesn't mean the weight of culture's habits and language is ignored. As with all identitarian categories, the one of the refugee is mobilized when it serves as an easy opposition between residents of the Cambridge squatter, be it a silly discussion about which nation has the best food or when Brazilians complain that only refugees have the right to use the computer room in the building. The category also serves to draw lines of inclusion/exclusion in the community, as in the initial scene of the assembly. But cultural habits and language also appear as means of connection. Hassan and Kalil, for example, are both Palestinians and have similar memories, speak the same language and sing the same song. Hassan understands when the younger man measures his feeling of

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the desert of his intimate life with familiar faces. Raising up a new home from the ruins, a solid building on impossible ground, that was the only possible outcome to his story" (Fuks, 2021, p. 88).

missing home with the size of the world and answers back by saying how much he misses his mom's bread and coffee. Cultural commonalities for sure bring bonding and support. But the narratives show a possibility that origin and nationality do not overdetermine the new journeys of refugees in Brazil. Hassam can understand Kalil's words when he speaks and sings Arabic, but Gilda also feels his hug and lullaby.

The difference between foreign refugees and "refugees in their own country" is also not ignored. This chapter stressed how citizens' displacement is unauthorized and illegalized in different ways than non-citizens' migration. But they also share a type of precarity in a concrete site and struggle, one that helps us see refugees not as an essentialized group whose characteristics are given beforehand, or whose subject positions are less important than cultural or national identities. They share important subject positions with Brazilians who occupy the former Cambridge Hotel and other squats in São Paulo's city center, and in this sense I gather them in the form of life of "transnational precarious nomads" (Fassin, 2018). But under the form, there are lives of people who create alliances in their everyday to sustain the occupations, subjective relations not only determined by a cause even though prompted by it. They form a collective political subject that connects people from "transnational third worlds" (Santos, 2004), but whose connection is not guaranteed by the fact that they are transnational precarious nomads.

In different ways, *Era o Hotel Cambridge* and *Occupation* treat the everyday as eventful (Das, 2007), highlighting an extended temporality of migrants' political struggles, which are not strictly attached to "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2002, 2008), but formed by a flow of "instants-now" that humanizes the interval between beginning and end. Politics is not only found in the moment of rights-claim, or after this claim is institutionalized, but in the transversal alliances sustained by the mundane life of cooking, repairing, discussing and partying together. The commonplace life does not only prepare for the moments of "political interruption" (Darling, 2014) to happen. They are themselves political. As Ahmed (2000, p. 17, emphasis in original) states, "collectivities are formed through the *very work that has to be done* in order to get closer to other others." Even if there is an institutional difference that has relevant material consequences in the conditions of displacement and the rights of asylum seekers in the country they migrated to, there

is a fundamental dimension other than this difference, which is the sharing of a loss (Ahmed, 1999, p. 330) and an everyday work that allows for a heterogeneous and unstable collective political subject to emerge.

6
A wedding party *across* European borders: unbecoming refugees reimagine the 'asylum story'

A group of around 20 people is dressed for a traditional wedding. They have new haircuts and attire bought in a specialized shop in Milan, Italy. The groom and other men are shaved and wear suits and ties, and the bride wears a long white gown. They travel through European countries in four cars and a van, discreetly decorated with white ribbons. It is not clear if they are heading to a wedding ceremony or returning from it. We will probably know it if they are stopped at one of the five national borders they cross. But why would anyone stop European cars on roads that, as the Schengen Agreement sets up, are open to circulation once one is in the European Union? Why would any border patrol stop a wedding procession with groom, bride and well-dressed guests? With this improbability in mind, the group of mostly Europeans includes five Syrians and Syria's Palestinians[145] without permission to travel across Europe. Abdallah Sallam, Manar Bjermi, Alaa Bjermi, Ahmed Abed and Mona Ibrahem are not hidden in a truck as is usual when crossing the continent without documents. They are not in the cars' trunks. They are hidden

[145] In the film, some Palestinians, like Abdallah, Tasneem and Khaled, used to live in Syria, which is the home of many Palestinians since the 1948 displacement after Israel's occupation, followed by another wave with the 1967 war. When the Syrian war began in 2011, there were 12 official and unofficial Palestinian camps in Syria, with over 550,000 people. They were mostly in Damascus, Yarmouk being the largest one, with around 160,000 Palestinians. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) affirms in a 2021 report that the conflict in Syria "has left 91 per cent of the 438,000 Palestine refugees estimated to remain in the country in absolute poverty and 40 per cent displaced." Available on: https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2021_unrwa_syria_regional_crisis_emergency_appeal_final.pdf. Last access: March 13, 2023.

under hyper-visible wedding clothes and ornaments, on the backseats of cars, behind drivers with Italian passports.

No actual wedding has taken or will take place anywhere. It was invented as a plot so that non-Europeans could travel more easily into Europe. After having dangerously crossed the Mediterranean in precarious boats, they have not yet fully finished their journeys when arriving in Italy. Their wished destiny is Sweden, where they evaluate that the prospect of asylum recognition and guarantee of rights is higher. But since the Dublin Regulation establishes that the first country of arrival in the EU is the responsible member state for proceeding with asylum applications, they need to arrive in Sweden before being stopped and sent back to Italy, where they would have to give their fingerprints, wait for the legal procedures, and live and work even after having been granted refugee status. Before arriving in Malmö, Syrians, Syria's Palestinians and Italians depart from Milan and travel three thousand kilometers in four days, in November 2013, with stops in the European cities of Marseille, Bochum and Copenhagen. The trip is shown in the 2014 documentary *On the Bride's Side* (*Io Sto con la Sposa*), directed by the Syria's Palestinian poet Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, the Italian journalist Gabriele del Grande, and the Italian filmmaker Antonio Augugliaro.

On the one hand, Abdallah, Manar, Alaa, Ahmed and Mona are the prototype of contemporary asylum seekers. They endured risky journeys in the Mediterranean, having survived shipwrecks, just like the black Africans at Oranienplatz who were denied asylum, as seen in chapter 4. But differently from the Africans, who have come through Libya but were born in different countries, Syrians have the almost certainty of being granted asylum in Europe. They fit the expected plot: their state of origin has failed them, they were forced to move, risked their lives and now deserve future recognition. On the other hand, Abdallah, Manar, Alaa, Ahmed and Mona are not the typical asylum seekers. To go after their desire, they follow an imagined and joyful script instead of repeating "the same predictable, fucked-up plot" (Luiselli, 2017, p. 51). The newly invented plot is actually a very common one, a traditional wedding with the bride in white, but not for asylum seekers who, if willing to arrive at a specific destiny in Europe, are usually dependent on paying smugglers and taking risky paths on foot and under or inside trucks where one can hardly breathe. By bringing fiction into reality, they reimagine the "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017) as one of desire and put the European

border regime into question by exposing its fictional dimensions. Unbecoming refugees, they divert from the expected plot.

Abdallah, Manar, Alaa, Ahmed and Mona manage to transgress the asylum story with the participation of a transnational network of activists who not only help them but take responsibility for the journey. The three directors invited close friends to be the traveling wedding guests, and they all risk a charge of human trafficking, which could result in 15 years in prison.[146] The risk of the five undocumented people, at that point, was to be sent back to Italy and having to apply for asylum there, maybe diminishing their chances of gaining recognition as refugees or having to wait more for it. Besides the ones organizing the trip, there was the participation of activists in Marseille, Bochum, and Copenhagen, people involved with the cause of migration who sheltered the crew and provided them not only with information but also moments of conversation, joy, relief and party.

This chapter takes a deep look into *On the Bride's Side* as a story that addresses some of the most known and mediatic issues regarding people who seek asylum in Europe – escaping the Syrian war, crossing the Mediterranean, traveling into Europe to go to a preferred destiny – and, without diminishing the rights of refugees, questions the European border regime that obliges them to follow the "fucked-up plot" and adapt to the "asylum story." It both recognizes asylum seekers' rights and makes us see asylum seekers differently. The first part of the chapter, *The wedding plot and the ambivalence of the border*, concentrates on this duality, analyzing how it is achieved through a narrative that conjoins the transgression of the border regime, in which borders' oppression is felt even when borders are not visible, and the plot of a wedding party, which is not only a creative concrete way of taking undocumented people to Sweden but also work as an imaginative device that gives asylum seekers a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, 2015).

In the first section of this part, I examine some of the ambivalences of the European border regime, which reinforces the figure of speechless refugees but whose breaches may also allow displaced people to continue their journey *within* Europe. The following section analyzes how the wedding plot is a fictional device through which characters deal with the duality of conforming to the norms and

[146] Article 12 of Italy's legislative decree 286/98.

transgressing them: it masquerades the *figure* of asylum seekers, frustrating expectations of truth and authenticity required of them and, by doing so, allows them to circumvent the materialization of territorial borders. In this move, the convoy of a traditional wedding party queers the logic of the border, showing how the instantiation of borders produces illegality and speechless subjects, and not the other way around. Besides that, the wedding offers imagination for a life to come, shared in a compromise of a transnational network.

The second part of the chapter, *Stories from the Mediterranean Sea*, places *On the Bride's Side* in the context of cultural productions that, in the last decade, have focused on shipwrecks and drownings of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. I begin with an overview of how a contemporary visual iconography of the Mediterranean crossings is related to a production of knowledge that frames migration/refugeeness as a crisis, reiterating views and feelings that were already consolidated before, instead of producing other worlds through a redistribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004, 2008, 2009). But instead of simply analyzing how representations of contemporary migration reinforce stereotypes about people on the move, I take *On the Bride's Side* as an example of reframing risky migratory journeys while not erasing their violence.

The subsequent section shows how the documentary deals with the tragedies in the Mediterranean through the testimonies of the asylum seekers, who have all survived shipwrecks in the sea, and tell their stories at different moments of the trip. The film does not refuse representation: we actually see the tragedies through storytelling since any testimony is also a representation (Rancière, 2008). Nevertheless, it complexifies the victimhood that the isolated testimonies could privilege, connecting them to a chain of images/speeches of joy, support, and plans for the future, while being attentively listened to by the others who are *with* them. Through storytelling to a community of listeners, they regain "a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson, 2002, p. 15).

The following section then rethinks agency through a comparison between *On the Bride's Side* and the film *The Swimmers* (2022), which relies on the dichotomy of victim/hero, on the story of refugees who, on their own, overcome unthinkable obstacles. When it shows the need for a transnational network that questions the law and finds ways of breaking it together with the most vulnerable people, *On the Bride's Side* substitutes morality for politics. Agency, then, does not

rely on the will and deservingness of people, but in a combination of valuing people's desires, as in the possibility that they choose where to apply for asylum, but also the need that there is a collective formation to creatively put those desires forward. Subjectivities are treated as relationalities, as in the narratives about the Cambridge squatter presented in chapter 5.

In the last part of the chapter, which is a brief conclusion, I stress the path that I hope to implicitly take during the whole chapter, which is to unbind cognitive and territorial borders, a necessary move to question the category of the refugee in a world of movement where borders are disappearing, multiplying and reappearing in unexpected places. The chapter highlights how boundaries created by relationalities defy the modern convergence between *nomos* and space, instead of generating the spatial containment of cognitive-territorial borders. It then reaffirms the goals of this dissertation while connecting this chapter to the last concluding one.

6.1
The wedding plot and the ambivalence of the border

La frontera está cerrada, pero vamos a pasar[147]

We did not cross the border, the border crossed us[148]

On the Bride's Side begins with joyful characters preparing for a wedding ceremony while their names appear in the opening credits: they try outfits in a specialized shop, they shave and have their hair washed and cut in a beauty salon. In the following scene, Tasneem Fared comes into a living room with her long white gown and bridal veil, carrying a bouquet, and is welcomed by the guests' claps and whoops. She and Abdallah Sallam, the groom, feed each other in the mouth. Someone dances a song in Arabic in the middle of the room, the others smile and clap along. It is a wedding party.

[147] "The border is closed, but we will cross" is a phrase from the Honduran song *En Caravana*, by Chiky Rasta, sung in migrants' caravans crossing Mexico.

[148] The quote is repeated by Mexican American activists of immigrant rights movements in the United States. It has become the title of some recent artworks: a screen print by artist and activist Melanie Cervantes, in which the sentence lies below the picture of a Native American; and Adrien Missika's series of photographs of the rare Saguaro cactus that only grows in Arizona, at the border with Mexico.

A moment later, they are all gathered in the same living room around a map of Europe. If one looks at it, the closest option to go to Sweden from Milan is Switzerland, but they need to head South because almost all the borders to the North are closed, Khaled explains. The film's directors-activists show the roads they will drive on and what they should do if stopped by border controls: "The Italians get out first, show passports and identity cards," says Gabriele, while the others pay close attention. "You just stay back and keep calm. We will talk to them."[149] It is a preparation for crossing borders without permission.

The convoy is about to leave Milan at dawn. Some people decorate the cars with white ribbons while others seem already apprehensive about what is ahead of them. From now on, the joyful wedding party and the tense crossing of borders, defying European legislation, are inseparable.

6.1.1
To and *within* the borders of Europe

In Metz, France, close to the border with Luxembourg, a car with only Italians travels half an hour ahead to guarantee that there aren't roadblocks. If there is any, they can warn the other cars, which are then able to get off the road. Gabriele, who drives one of the cars behind, answers the phone and listens: "All clear, just lorries and sleeping drivers." The convoy approaches the territorial limit between France and Luxembourg. Manar asks: "Is this the border? What border is it?" One of the wedding guests answers: "Luxembourg." We see the same dark road as before. Manar goes on: "Luxembourg? But isn't it too soon?" For Manar, a kid who survived a shipwreck in the Mediterranean, a border should take longer to go through. The man says they are crossing it at that moment, and Manar stretches his neck, trying to see the invisible border. "That's where the police normally are," one of the wedding guests says. But there are no police. Half an hour later, there is already another border to cross, between Luxembourg and Germany. Alaa calls his son's attention, following an imagined ritual of proper behavior, a role to be performed at the border.

[149] All quotes from the film, mostly spoken in Arabic, are from the subtitles in English by the streaming platform filmzie.com.

> Alaa (tense): Sit properly. Sit properly, there's even a light on in the car.
> Manar: If they salute you and say *ciao*…
> Alaa: Who do you think is going to salute me and say *ciao*? Do you really think they'll say *ciao* at a checkpoint?
> Manar (smiling): …you say: *Ciao, come stai? Tutto bene?*
> Alaa: They will hear you are an Arab. Look, when we speak Italian, we are like Gabriele when he speaks Arabic. Brokenly. You can tell.

They look again over the window to see if there are police around, but there are only trucks. The atmosphere is tense: the border is there even though no one can see it. It is there in Alaa's instructions to Manar. It is there when Ahmed holds Mona's hand while she sleeps; he can't sleep, he is thinking about their children, about "what might happen on the way." The border is there when they wait for a call from the first car to know if they can continue traveling or should change plans. It is there even when people say the way is safe, just because they need to say it: "We are crossing the border now and it's all clear. Nobody, not even traffic." The border is on the maps they must study to calculate the routes, the possible exits and the time to wait and drive. But while the border is frequently evoked, as an insistent shadow that gains concreteness through fears, hopes and expectations, it also vanishes. In their case, it vanishes because they have European friends and information, cars, telephones, maps, and, of course, the wedding plot. The invisibility of borders does not mean they are not operating (Bigo, 2011): they need to maintain the flux, the circulation, while still addressing some bodies and not others. We don't see any border control during the whole journey, but even though the border does not make itself materially visible, it has social and affective effects. The ambivalence of presence/absence evidences how bordering practices extend way beyond demarcated territorial borders.

The first territorial border the group crosses is the Grimaldi Superiore, a mountain between Ventimiglia, in Italy, and Menton, in France, also known as the "death path." They all go up and down by foot, in their wedding attire, including the bride in white, who does not abandon her role, even if she needs help to hold a cigarette in one hand and the dress' tail in the other. Up in the mountain, they can see the peaceful French sea shore, where a car with activists waits for them to continue the journey. Before the trip started, Khaled referred to the mountain as "the old border" since it used to be the path Italians without permission took to arrive in France. "Fifty years ago, it was us the illegal immigrants in France," added

Gabriele, who, as an Italian in 2013, would not need to go this way to enter other European countries. Inside a construction in ruins on the way, where migrants leave messages in the peeled-off walls, we now read mainly names in Arabic.

Gabriele's statement historicizes free movement inside the continent, which for young Europeans might be a given. The enlargement of the European Union and the opening of borders for people's circulation between EU countries have always been followed by the containment of movement in the external borders and by surveillance inside, in a permanent negotiation between the need for flows of capital, goods, workers and tourists and a threatening excess of movement. Although in alleged moments of crisis the containment of movement is treated as exceptional, it works in a continuum of inclusion-exclusion in which processes of securitization are intrinsic to the management of movement in liberal democracies (Huysmans, 2006; Neocleous, 2007; Bigo, 2007; Kotef, 2015).[150]

The Schengen Agreement, which has eliminated controls in the borders of signatories European countries since the mid-1990s (although signed in 1985), is conditioned to the possibility that member states reinstate them in cases of "threat to public order or internal security."[151] Ventimiglia is a place where this has often happened, pointing to a problematic relationship between France and Italy regarding the circulation of undocumented migrants. In April 2011, for example, with the arrival of many Tunisians in Italy after the "Arab Spring" and the Libyan war, Silvio Berlusconi's government gave them temporary visas. The official argument was humanitarian, but the hope was that Tunisians would continue their trip to France, a country with which they have colonial bonds.[152] With the expected move to France, Nicolas Sarkozy's government interrupted the traffic of trains coming from Ventimiglia, at the Italian border, alleging a threat to the public order foreseen by the 2006 Schengen Borders Code.

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[150] Through the analysis of institutional changes, I have elsewhere shown how the reinforcement of border controls and the development of technologies of surveillance have been a crucial focus of EU's migration policies, even before they were incorporated into the EU law, when they were still a matter of intergovernmental cooperation (Velasco, 2014).

[151] The Schengen Agreement became part of the EU law in 1997 with the Treaty of Amsterdam. Article 25 of the 2006 Schengen Borders Code determines the possibility of closing internal borders due to a threat to public order or internal security.

[152] Mezzadra (2015, p. 127) notes that, ironically, most Tunisians were pro-revolution in Libya and, although celebrated in Europe as protagonists of the "Arab Spring," they had "an uncanny idea of freedom, one that comprised freedom of movement."

The example is one among many in which EU countries did not follow the principle of open internal borders. As seen in chapter 2, that also happened many times during 2015's "long summer of migration," when national states in the EU have differently decided to close or open their borders. Studying the European border regime, Richard, the protagonist of the novel *Go Went, Go*, examined in chapter 4, affirms: "The Italian laws have different borders in mind than the German laws do" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 84). He goes on: "The foreigner, who is at home in neither of these countries, is trapped between these now-invisible fronts in an intra-European discussion that has nothing at all to do with him or the actual war he's trying to escape from" (Ibid.).

Despite the appearance of rigid EU regulation, pretty much discretionary decisions are crucial for asylum seekers' plans. Differently from the stereotyped figure of someone who should be grateful wherever placed, migrants often move with a plan of where to go and need information about border controls because, unlike citizens, they cannot freely circulate. As seen in chapter 4, since 1990, the Dublin Regulation establishes that the first country of arrival in the European Union is the responsible member state for proceeding with an asylum application and the country where to be sent back if one moves inside the EU without authorization. It reinforces a border regime in which refugees, as speechless subjects, should be grateful for what states have to offer them, with no possibility of deciding where to continue their lives. That is why asylum seekers try to circumvent fingerprinting until arriving at their preferred destiny, where they want to claim asylum. Even if entering Northern countries such as Sweden and Germany usually requires having gone through other EU countries first, since only a few asylum seekers manage to arrive by plane, the lack of fingerprinting makes it harder to determine which first country it was and, in practice, allows that most asylum seekers go through the procedures in their final destiny. That is the context in which the documentary's characters carefully plan how to go through different European borders without the risk of being caught, fingerprinted, or sent back to Italy before arriving and asking for asylum in Sweden, the place they have chosen to continue their lives. It is also why, having been already fingerprinted in Italy, Alaa Bjermi is afraid that he and his son, Manar, are sent back even if they arrive safely in Sweden.

Osseiran (2017) recounts how, when preparing for their journeys, Syrian migrants/refugees' imaginings of Europe respond to information acquired from

other migrants/refugees in transit but also from different asylum regimes, fingerprinting and internal mechanisms of control which render some European countries as spaces of transit or to be avoided in migration paths.[153] In her ethnographic research from July 2012 to December 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey, where the arrival of Syrians dramatically increased after the 2011 uprising in Syria, Osseiran noticed how a hierarchy among migrants/refugees usually placed Italy, Bulgaria and France as transit countries, while Germany and Sweden were the preferred destinies, according to social assistance and the perspective of residency and family reunification (Ibid., p. 196-200). This evaluation is, for sure, contingent and can change very quickly. At the time of her fieldwork, which coincides with the arrival of Syrians and Syria's Palestinians in the documentary, Sweden was seen as even better than Germany for the fast speed of analyzing asylum claims, a perception that has changed after the "long summer of migration" (Ibid., p. 200). In January 2016, due to the increase in asylum applications in Sweden, identity controls were introduced at the borders with Denmark, a measure that would have precluded the wedding plot. In the same month, Denmark itself turned into a non-desirable place for many displaced people due to the approval of a law allowing the police to confiscate asylum seekers' money and valuables exceeding ten thousand kroner (around 1,400 dollars).

Discretionary measures of EU member states may also help asylum seekers finding breaches. Italy, where many arrive when crossing the Mediterranean Sea, often don't immediately take their fingerprints because it does not want to deal with the huge numbers of newcomers, just like the government did in 2011 with Tunisians. That is how three of the five asylum seekers in *On the Bride's Side* managed to leave Italy without being fingerprinted. That is also the case in Greece, another country whose governments often complain about the burden of the Dublin Regulation for Southern European states, which receive migrants coming from the Mediterranean. For planning the trip *within* the EU, it is crucial to know how border controls are working at the moment of displacement to make a decision. In the documentary, this knowledge is shared by European activists, who define, for

[153] The author uses the term migrant/refugee "as a means of recognizing and maintaining the tensions between people's different terms of self-identification. This emphatic duality also serves as a reminder of both the significance and instability of official political categories and juridical statuses in affecting the lives of those to whom they are applied." (Osseiran, 2017, p. 188)

example, that refugees should cross the Grimaldi Superiore instead of taking the shorter way through Switzerland.

As Osseiran states (2017, p. 191), "[m]igrants/refugees' movement *within* the EU space, therefore, is best understood to be, at times, a continuation of their movement *into* the EU space – toward 'Europe'." Asylum seekers might take advantage of the vacuum of the law and help reconfigure what Europe is beyond maps or institutionalized borders. However, this does not mean that it is easy to go where one wants to. Khosravi (2007) reminds us how arbitrary the final destination can be for people dependent on smugglers and their connections. In an auto-ethnography, he tells how US$500 so differently defined the paths of his and his roommate's lives: "He had US$500 more than me and today he is a Canadian citizen, lives in Toronto and his children's mother tongue is English. I am a Swedish citizen, live in Stockholm and my children's language is Swedish" (Ibid., p. 329).[154]

Khosravi (Ibid.) recognizes the role of information and rumor in defining the destinies of displaced people, but the information they bring with them may not always be enough to continue moving within the EU. After arriving in Lampedusa, Italy, in October 2013, Abdallah left a reception center with his backpack and went to the central train station in Milan, where he overheard three men speaking in Arabic and asked them how to take the next train to Sweden. "We laughed. No trains were leaving for Sweden, so we offered him a coffee," recalls Gabriele del Grande, who was there with Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and another friend.[155] They sat together and had a long conversation. Gabriele, an Italian journalist and activist, creator of the migration blog Fortress Europe, had just come back from Aleppo, in Syria, where he worked as a reporter. Khaled, a Syria's Palestinian, had gone to Italy years before to claim asylum. Directly involved with the war, they had already met and sheltered many migrants coming to Europe but had not gone so far in their activism as they would with Abdallah, also a Syria's Palestinian, student of English literature from Yarmouk camp, in Damascus, who had survived a shipwreck in the Mediterranean just two weeks before.

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[154] As seen in chapter 5, many characters of the novel *Occupation*, Brazilians and foreigners, just happened to be in São Paulo by chance.

[155] Gabriele del Grande writes about the encounter in Al Jazeera online, where the film used to be streamed: www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2015/10/20/on-the-brides-side. Last access: March 13, 2023.

6.1.2
With the bride

What border patrol agent would ever stop a bride to check her documents? The question was posed by the journalist Gabriele del Grande when discussing a way to help take asylum seekers into Europe with the poet Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and the filmmaker Antonio Augugliaro. They invited Abdallah to be the groom and Tasneem Fared, another Palestinian from Yarmouk, Syria, to be the bride. The difference is that Tasneem had a German passport, which gave her the right to free movement in the EU, but also made it possible for her to be charged with human trafficking, in the same way as the other Europeans on the trip. Four other refugees were invited to be among the "guests." The convoy within Europe, then, was formed by a group of asylum seekers who wanted to go to Sweden with fewer risks and Europeans willing to take the risk of being persecuted and going to jail. A first rearrangement of borders and the European space is enacted in this configuration, one that highlights the criminalization of Europeans who in theory could go wherever they want inside the EU.[156]

But there is more to it. The activists/film crew do not just take asylum seekers with them. Together, they all perform an imagined script that, through a hyper-visible wedding party, changes the *figure* of refugees, who are now allowed to have desire and joy. Only if their documents are controlled on the way will they be made migrants/asylum seekers, to use Tazzioli's (2019) terminology of the *making* of migration. Otherwise, they will just be the groom, the bride and their guests. In this move, the plot stresses how the instantiation of borders produces

[156] Risks have prevented the anthropologist Jason De León to follow undocumented migrants in crossing the border between Mexico and the United States, even though he states that the main reason was the risk for them, not for him. De León (2015, p. 12) adds to a debate about appropriation when creating a product, be it a film or research, out of migratory stories: "Over the course of five years of research, many people I met in Nogales invited me to accompany them into the desert. For a number of reasons, I declined every offer. First, I have always believed that my participation in a border crossing would be an unnecessary risk for my informants to take and something that would have reinforced, if not exacerbated, the hierarchy between me (a college professor) and the working-class migrants who trust me with their stories. Putting myself into a research scenario where my interlocutors are highly vulnerable while I am protected by my citizenship status is at odds with the type of anthropology that I want to practice. A second, albeit from my perspective less important, issue is that 'entry without inspection,' which is what US citizens are charged with when they cross the border through a nonofficial port of entry, is a crime (a mere civil offense) and something that could potentially jeopardize my employment and federal grant funding. If I had undertaken such a problematic endeavor, the headline in the right-leaning media outlets that occasionally throw stones at this research would no doubt read: 'Mexican Professor Helps Illegals Cross the Desert and Uses National Science Foundation Money to Pay for It'."

illegality and speechless subjects, and not the other way around. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 268) affirm, "the border is productive of subjectivity, rather than acting as a mere limit on already-formed subjects." Borders create worlds.[157]

Ironically, the political and aesthetic transgression takes the form of a traditional wedding with the bride in a white gown. For Abbey (2022), the documentary's plot is a direct critique of the fact that marriage is one of the few ways of having permission to enter Europe, which has fostered an obsession with detecting sham marriages. Cox (2016) brings up that same point when she relates the film to an analysis of how a performance of intimate lives is required specifically of homosexual partners, who are tested in behaviors and preferences to prove if they are truly homosexual. But while the requirements of truth and authenticity have their specificities when marriage is the means for crossing the border, it is part of an overarching logic to regulate different types of asylum procedures, as seen in chapter 2. In this sense, as Cox (Ibid.) puts it, the film relates to "larger questions about refugee 'appearance' and to the way European asylum jurisdictions and social topographies are set up to adjudicate performances of intimate or private life."

I suggest that more than pointing to the specific demands made to marriages in the EU space, the narrative uses the wedding as a way to play with the duality of transgressing the norms by conforming to them. Uniting the appearance of a very common and accepted ritual of a wedding and the unexpected part asylum seekers have in it, the mise-en-scène allows them to transgress the European border regime and the roles expected of them. As Cox (Ibid.) notes, they have new clothes and haircuts "in order to appear 'legitimate' users of civic spaces: restaurants, highways, stations, train carriages, streets, city squares." Paradoxically, it is suiting to the eyes of Europeans that they frustrate expectations of truth and authenticity and, in the act of doing so, manage to circumvent the materialization of territorial borders. As Abbey (2022, p. 963) states,

> The wedding party becomes the means of simultaneously making present and absent their crossing. The 'migrant' crossing the border is replaced by the wedding party crossing the border. Indeed, the migrant is not 'supposed' to display their

[157] Richard, the protagonist of the novel *Go, Went, Gone* (chapter 4), also thinks about the production of subjectivities by borders: "Have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn't just measured by an opponent's stature but in fact creates him?" (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 252).

> subversion of either marriage or the border, hence the status of migrants *as migrants* is masked by doing exactly what is unexpected.

I reframe Gabriele del Grande's question: What border patrol agent would ever think that undocumented migrants would fake a wedding? Abbey (2022) uses Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as the mocking of societal rules and power structures to show how the performance of the wedding destabilizes the border, highlighting its violence but also its failure. Even if the transgression that leads to this failure is temporary, and does not provoke an immediate change, it "offers other ways of imagining society in the process" (Ibid., p. 960). It exposes the European border regime, showing that, although violent, it is not absolute; and, through the wedding plot, it provides travelers with room to imagine a future that would not be possible according to European law. The wedding party does not erase their memories of hardships and the fear of days ahead but, by literally taking an imaginative device to reality, lends them a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, 2015) that does not fit the script of the typical "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017). It does that concretely, since the performance masquerades the real reason for the trip, allowing the group to arrive in Sweden; but it also works as a narrative resource that stresses the need to perform a role to be able to cross borders. We will never know if the plot actually influenced the outcomes of a peaceful trip, if the group would have otherwise been stopped. There is a degree of arbitrariness in border controls. Even though there were no guarantees, it is important to note that, in the documentary, it is by allowing one to imagine a different way of political belonging that a safer way to circumvent the violence of the border regime is achieved.

While Abbey (2022) stresses the mocking of the EU's regulation of marriages, I suggest that the political imagination brought by the wedding plot is much more related to the symbolism of a renewal of life, one that concerns not only individual lives but a community of "wedding guests," be them Europeans or not. In the documentary, the "sham marriage" is between bride and groom, but the actual marriage is among all those involved in the trip to Sweden. They all say "yes" when they dress in formal clothes and enter decorated cars, taking the risks implied by the plot. There is a compromise by people who are not only emphatic to displaced migrants/refugees' hardships but take responsibility in offering an alternative to them. That move includes other non-Europeans who are already safe in Europe. In

one of the cars, Khaled receives a phone call with the news that, after five years in Italy, he was granted an Italian passport. The reaction is emotional because, as a Palestinian, he had never had a passport before.

> Khaled: It's the first time I've ever had a citizenship [*he cries*]. It's the first time I feel like I've got a citizenship, with a state behind me. I know these are empty words. I know the Italian state won't be behind me. You know… it's strange.
> Abdallah: It's normal. It's your first passport.
> Khaled: A passport is a nationality.
> Groom: You are part of a state.
> Khaled: Us, Palestinians, don't have a nationality. Even in international law, we're considered stateless.

Although Khaled does not have an idealized vision of the state's protection, this recognition is important for him. But his new status also implies a new risk, because now he can be charged with human trafficking when joining the trip. Like the others, he is *with* the bride (the film's original name in Italian, *Io Sto con la Sposa*, literally means *I Am with the Bride*). The bride is also with them. At some point in the trip, we learn that Tasneem Fared left Syria only two months before, even though she had a German passport. While driving the car, Gabriele asks her why she didn't leave when the war started.

> Tasneem: Because I didn't want to go. Those people are there for me. Those people are fighting for me. I couldn't leave those people. I could have left, but the others couldn't. And so, you know, every single person is important. There's still life, families, children, women. Everything is still there.
> Gabriele: And what did you do there?
> Tasneem: I tried to give a hand. But just being there was very important. Because the boys there are not fighting for empty houses. They are not fighting to defend empty houses. They are fighting for the people.

Gabriele is driving, he cannot see Tasneem, he just listens to her. We can see they are both emotional. She says: "I did not want to leave Syria. I don't know how I came to leave but…" Frustrating what is expected of someone living amid war, Tasneem shows that the decision of leaving or staying does not depend only on a passport. Even having the German document, she chose to stay in Syria for some years. Later she left but, taking the leading role in the wedding plot, she was again restating the importance of "just being there."

As mentioned in the previous section, many of the people involved in the trip/film/activism already had political connections not only with Syria but also

with migrants arriving in Europe without permission. Gabriele and Khaled used to shelter newcomers, just like the activists who travel with them and the ones they meet at the journey's different stops: "Families come, people from Dummar,[158] friends from Khan el-Sheih,[159] or a friend calls to tell you he's got people coming," Khaled says. "Sometimes, if there's no room at my house, I call Gabriele, and Gabriele takes some of them, or Tareq. You can't leave people out on the street. But then, when a thousand or two thousand people start arriving, what can you do?"

Besides the territorial limits between states the group manages to cross, European borders also become places of encounter in different cities, where they celebrate the wedding, even if only for four days, during which they travel three thousand kilometers. People in Marseille, Bochum and Copenhagen not only shelter them, but dance, sing and eat together, have conversations, listen to them and give them information about the best routes to take without being stopped by border guards.[160] Without this shared knowledge and affective and material support, it would be harder for asylum seekers to continue the movement within Europe, even though many still make it on their own every day. Borders/boundaries practices, then, are also moments of connection not just related to a common origin or nationality, but to "alternative ties of kinship based on shared experience and solidarity," as Woolley (2020, p. 156) states, in a text about the film. *On the Bride's Side* turns out to be a collective enterprise, involving its participants in an affective community, like *Era o Hotel Cambridge* does, though in different ways, as seen in chapter 5.

The political and affective act of being on the bride's side was extended to spectators, who were also called to participate. After preparing the trip/footage with their own money and the help of close friends and arriving safely in Europe, the directors organized a crowdfunding campaign to finance the film's postproduction. Intended to raise 75,000 euros, it received 101,000 euros from 2,617 supporters in 30 countries (Ponzanesi, 2016, p. 163). The collective funding extended the

[158] The largest district in Damascus, in the northwest of the Syrian capital.
[159] Palestinian camp in the South of Damascus. According to Salamah and Heide-Jørgensen (2016), the bombardment of the Yarmouk camp at the end of 2012 led many of its inhabitants to escape to Khan el-Sheih, which was also sieged and shelled in 2013. The authors note that both camps are now considered "non-accessible" areas by the UNRWA.
[160] In a 2104 interview, Gabriele del Grande says that the people who hosted them are from networks created over the years in different European cities. Available on: http://digicult.it/news/io-sto-con-la-sposa-va-in-scena-la-disobbedienza-civile/. Last access: March 13, 2023.

transnational network beyond the road trip, connecting the film's making to spectators. It also made it harder for any subsequent legal charge to be placed against the film crew, which became huge once the crowdfunders were all credited, name by name, as co-producers (Ibid.). With the money, the documentary was finished in time to be shown at the 2014 Venice Film Festival, where the guests continued on the bride's side, with all the women in white dresses on the red carpet.

6.2
Stories from the Mediterranean Sea

In the last decade, shipwrecks of boats with migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea have been reported as moments of emergency in migration flows to Europe, renewing the fictional origins of a contemporary "crisis" and the responses to it, such as the securitization of borders and the creation of activist networks. Every year, tragedies on the shores of the Mediterranean would mark a new moment of commotion, although the supposedly exceptional moments had been happening before and would continue to happen. The drowning of hundreds of people in two boats close to the island of Lampedusa, Italy, in October 2013 was one such moment. The interval of just eight days between the shipwrecks and the high number of deaths have turned the events into a mediatic marker.[161] In April 2015, another record of deaths anticipated the "long summer of migration," which, as seen in chapter 2, helped revive a dispute about the use of categories such as *refugees* or *migrants*. While people have found alternative ways of getting to Europe, like the Balkan route, the sea has continued to be one of the main paths for migrants, though strictly controlled by European border patrols. In parallel, scenes of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean kept adding to a repertoire of images of overcrowded refugee camps, walking multitudes and barbed wires, which shape

[161] Lynes, Morgenstern and Paul (2020, p. 31) examine the discourse of crisis in relation to an ongoing securitization and deaths at European borders: "As the open data project *The Migrants' Files* carefully records, what has quite suddenly been deemed a 'crisis' has in fact been unfolding continuously and coterminously with the shifting configurations that take the name 'Europe' for nearly two decades. Since 1993, more than 35,000 migrants have been lost during the perilous crossing to Europe – a staggering disaster by any measure. And yet these deaths only seemed to emerge as a 'crisis' proper in 2013, as traumatic images surfaced of 360 migrants drowned off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa."

migration/refugeeness as crisis and consolidate a humanitarian visual culture (Mezzadra, 2020a).[162]

In this context, the Mediterranean has become the focus of research concerned with control and surveillance (Bigo, 2015; Dijstelbloem, 2015), the militarization of the border regime in the sea (De Genova, 2017; Stierl, 2021), its connections to colonialism (Danewid, 2017; Ben-Yehoyada, 2017; Soto Bermant, 2017; Smythe, 2018) and border struggles (Heller and Pezzani[163], 2019, 2020; Heller, Pezzani and Stierl, 2017, 2019; Mezzadra, 2020b).[164] Academic research accompanied media news and artistic productions, such as feature films, documentaries and art exhibitions of a wide audience reach. In a volume dedicated to the contemporary visual iconography of displacement to Europe and its relation to the production of knowledge about migration/refugeeness, Lynes, Morgenstern and Paul (2020, p. 33) point out that "the migrant crisis, and indeed the migrant body, has become the locus of a highly formalized and notably more conventional regime of textual and aesthetic production."[165]

Analyzing shocking images, especially of war, and their effects on spectators in different contexts, Sontag and Rancière refer to feelings that pictures may help to awaken but that already existed. Sontag (2003, p. 10) mentions, for example, images of the destruction of the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, which provoked a revolt among Arabs and sympathizers of the Palestinian cause around the world: "Incendiary as that footage was to the many who watch Al Jazeera throughout the world, it did not tell them anything about the Israeli army they were not already primed to believe." Rancière (2009) analyzes one of the pictures of Martha Rosler's photomontage *Bringing the War Home,* which puts together photos

[162] See Bleiker et al. (2013) for a discussion about the "visual dehumanization of refugees."

[163] Already in 2011, Heller and Pezzani founded the project Forensic Oceanography, based at Goldsmiths, University of London, which documents migrants' deaths in the Mediterranean. With other activists, they also created the platform WatchTheMed in 2012, which monitors crossings in the sea, helping to support migrants in danger and connecting them with nongovernmental actors.

[164] See also the recent special edition of the journal Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, edited by Işleyen and El Qadim (2023), with the theme *Border and Im/mobility Entanglements in the Mediterranean*.

[165] Some examples are the documentaries *Exodus*, produced by the BBC; Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016), which won the film festival Berlinale; and *Human Flow* (2017), by artist Ai Weiwei, who has also made pictures and art installations on the theme. Other cultural productions that thematize the Mediterranean are the feature film *The Swimmers* (2022), produced by Netflix; and art installations such as *End of Dreams*, by Nikolaj Skyum Bendix Larsen, and *Barca Nostra*, by Christoph Büchel. This iconography surrounding migrants' paths in the Mediterranean can be considered part of what Shields (2011) calls "reality hunger," although the mentioned productions treat reality in very different ways.

of the Vietnamese war and of nice houses in the United States taken from the magazine *House Beautiful*. In one of them, a Vietnamese man with a dead child in his arms is placed in a large and empty apartment. While it is "difficult to tolerate," says Rancière (Ibid., p. 85), "[f]or the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general." He adds: "she [*the artist*] must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt."[166]

A similar effect occurred with the visual iconography of last decade's crossings in the Mediterranean, which has reiterated views and feelings of crisis already consolidated before the production and reproduction of those images. Even if intended to denounce the European border regime, they helped solidify a framing of migration/refugeeness as crisis through an illustrative use of images, which serve to reiterate known worlds, and the feelings they engender, instead of creating other worlds. Take Ai Weiwei's 2015 staged picture lying on a Greek pebbled beach, hands upturned, in the same position as the dead Syrian toddler Alan Shenu on a beach in Turkey.[167] The difference was that after laying down, the artist could simply get up and continue to make his artwork. Or take the art installation *Barca Nostra*, by Christoph Büchel, who took the remains of the fishing vessel that sank close to Lampedusa in April 2015, when hundreds of migrants died, to the 2019 Venice Biennale and just presented it there. They are literal images. What do they show that has not been shown before? Moreover, they reproduce migrants as victims, leading to *sideration*, a paralysis that favors humanitarian actions but doesn't consider migrants as political subjects (Macé, 2018). Through reflections on de-politicizing forms of approaching migration, Macé proposes *consideration* instead of *sideration*, in the sense of taking account of migrants' lives, approaching them and facing not only their sufferings, which are nevertheless important, but also what they have built and aim to build in life. How differently do images make us see what is in front of us? Is it possible to frame other narratives for asylum seekers in such a violent context, when it seems that denouncing is already doing too much?

[166] See Campbell (2003, 2004) for a debate on representations of war and death in the disciplinary field of International Relations.

[167] As mentioned in chapter 2, Alan Shenu was given the name Aylan "Kurdi" ("curd") by Turkish authorities, and this was the name reproduced worldwide.

The representation of people left to die in the sea may be placed as another instance of an old debate about the uses and misusages of tragic images, either as a way of raising awareness of the subject (be it for matters of solidarity or control) or as of desensitizing people through an excessive reproduction.[168] I don't suggest that the problem is the production of images as a mode of representation. Following Rancière (2009), I argue in the next section that choosing not to show the drownings in the Mediterranean does not guarantee a different framing of the matter, one that escapes seeing migratory movements as crisis. But while avoiding showing certain types of tragic images does not necessarily lead to a different politics, it is important to pay attention to how they are shown and relate them to other images in a chain of representations. I take *On the Bride's Side* as an example of reframing the Mediterranean crossings while not erasing their violence.

6.2.1
Showing, telling, listening

To the critique that there is something unrepresentable in extreme acts of violence, which could never be fully grasped by any attempt to show them, Rancière (2004, 2009) argues that something could only be considered unrepresentable in the representative regime of arts, which separates events in a causal and ordered logic (fiction) from the disordered empirical world.[169] In this regime, there is a coherence between what is said and seen, who can say it and what themes are supposed to be

[168] Authors such as Rancière and Sontag complexify the common view that images are intolerable because, as a spectacle, they fix our gaze and prevent us to act; or that the excessive circulation of images makes us insensitive to the situations they represent. In *On Photography* (1977), Sontag argued that the intense repetition of images would make us indifferent to them, but she later questioned her own point of view in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). In the latter essay, she affirms that the way an image is used is a determinant of its impact. The medium of television news, for example, is organized according to the flow of images, while "a more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness" (Ibid., p. 106).

[169] Representations of the Holocaust, for example, have been subject to extensive debate regarding what can be seen or said. In a short article on Holocaust's (un)representability, Rancière says that the Oscar-winning film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), by Roberto Benigni, is mediocre not because concentration camps cannot be put in images, but because the movie's scenes "don't have more or fewer reasons for existing than precedent images." He goes on to affirm that to "subtract [*an exceptional event*] from the ordinary conditions of representation is as dangerous as trivializing it, representing it according to the same rules of the others" (Rancière, 1999, my translation). Ten years later, Rancière (2009) reaffirms this thought in *Intolerable Image*. For an account of the problems of both Holocaust's representation and its refusal, see Hartman (1996). More than a discussion on (u)representability, narratives regarding the Holocaust are the best examples of how language navigates what seems impossible to put into words. See, for example, Levi (1988 [1958]), Celan (1993) and Didi-Huberman (2011).

represented. In the aesthetic regime of arts, as seen in chapter 2, there is no separation between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction: art is not a way of ordering the messy empirical world, revealing what would otherwise remain disordered and making us clearly see what is out there. The principle of art, then, is not fiction, but a rearrangement of language, in which what is shown is not conditioned by what is meant. Politics lies exactly in disturbing this supposed equivalence; it lies in rearranging the distribution of the sensible, in displacing the supposedly fixed places of represented subjects, in tensioning what is said and what is shown. In this sense, there is no such thing as an unrepresentable theme. The aesthetic regime of arts opens possibilities for different forms of representation. The politics of aesthetics lies in how a form of representation either maintains or reimagines common senses and subjects' "proper places," substituting them for unbecoming ones.

In *The Intolerable Image*, a chapter of the book *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), Rancière argues that any testimony is also a representation, even though it does not rely on an image of the event itself. To the common argument that testimonies always retain something unsaid, indicating an unrepresentable excess in every narrative, Rancière points out that images can also aim for insufficiency. Not every image claim to show totality. Both the image of a boat sinking and the testimony of the boat sinking are forms of representation, "the act of offering an equivalent – something that speech does just as much as photography" (Ibid., p. 93). Neither is *per se* a guarantee of a different politics because both depend on the relationship with other representations, which change and are changed by them. Therefore, they depend on a chain of images/speeches that feed one another. As Rancière (Ibid., p. 99) states,

> [t]he issue of intolerability must then be displaced. The issue is not whether it is necessary to show the horrors suffered by the victims of some particular violence. It revolves around the construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible. An image never stands alone. It belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit. The issue is knowing the kind of attention prompted by some particular system.

According to this view, there is nothing fundamentally inadequate in representing the tragedies of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean. *On the Bride's Side* actually does that, although without recourse to images of the sea. It does that

when characters tell how they crossed the Mediterranean, had rescue denied by the Italian coastguard and international organizations and survived shipwrecks, seeing others die or disappear. They do that while being filmed, and later shown to us, spectators. Each testimony of the Mediterranean's crossing in *On the Bride's Side* is a voice "caught up in a process of image construction. It is the voice of a body that transforms one sensible event into another, *by striving to make us 'see' what it has seen, to make us see what it tells us*" (Ibid., p. 94, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, while we see the tragedies through storytelling, they are connected to a chain of images/speeches in the documentary that complexify the victimhood that the isolated testimonies could privilege, prompting close attention to them.

All five asylum seekers in the documentary survived shipwrecks in the sea, at three different moments. Their plot is very similar: overloaded boats, hunger, despair, delay or refusal of rescue, death, chance. They share these stories during the road trip with their travel mates, who listen closely. As spectators, we also listen to them and see them telling and the others listening. In the film, after the group crossed the first territorial border, walking up and down the Grimaldi Superiori, Alaa tells what he and his son, Manar, have gone through. Some listen attentively inside one of the cars, and also we listen to him as they go into a tunnel on a smooth trip, quite different from the one he recalls.

Alaa's story is straightforward. He tells about how he and his son, Manar, had to leave their bags and run toward the boat when they heard shootings. He tells how he managed to put Manar on board, but the boat started to move before he could enter. He tells how he was sucked in by the propeller and held until people pulled him on board. If one pays attention only to the information it brings, it might be considered not very different from immediate mediatic narratives about the drownings in the Mediterranean. But there are fundamental differences. First, Alaa tells it when he is already in France and safely moves ahead *within* Europe in a car, helped by people from different countries, defying the border regime. Second, he is listened to closely by one of the activists. Third, and not less importantly, the scene is connected to other ones of joy and support during the movie. In the film, Manar, who sleeps in the car while his father talks about the shipwreck, looks nothing like a vulnerable kid. In Marseille, he becomes MC Manar when he raps with musicians playing in a restaurant where the crew members party together. It is one of the most

joyful moments of the trip, even though the song lyrics are harsh. MC Manar sings energetically, surrounded by cheerful people:

> We built this refugee camp and built it again. Until we made a myth of the revolution. Our cause is forged in fire. I'm Palestinian and I shall return to our homeland and our homes. My story's the same, a routine that repeats itself. I was already a refugee from Palestine. And now we're fleeing again from the refugee camp. They drove us away and nobody realized. We suffered the cold and God helped us! We were starving, we even shared our names. We'll suffer like in Sabra for having seen the blood of Shatila. We've lost our most precious asset, which is safety. I'm living through what my grandfather once lived through. Why have your Palestinian people been deprived of everything? Stop the humiliation! We'll go back to the refugee camp and stay there united even if death sets up camp inside us. Death will set up camp inside each one of us. In Arabic…

Manar is aware of a historical context in which Palestinians were refugees even before being refugees. Besides not having a passport, as Khaled emotionally stressed when receiving his Italian document, some of the documentary's characters were already living in a refugee camp, Yarmouk, in Syria, when they crossed the sea to Europe. The shipwreck is a tragic event but it relates to a wider one ("I'm living through what my grandfather once lived through"). While the rap expresses this relationship, it says they will stay united. The testimony of the tragedy in the Mediterranean is not the whole story.

At another moment of rest, with a group of activists in Bochum, Ahmed remembers how he and his wife, Mona, survived. He wears a suit and a hat and has a glass of wine in his hand:

> There were 205 of us in the sea, including 75 children. The UN didn't help us. The Red Cross didn't help us. The coastguards didn't help us, twice. They sent a helicopter, filmed us, and went away. And who kicked up the fuss? The Syrians in the reception center. As soon as we phoned them and said we were drowning, the boys ran to the gates of the reception center. All Syrians were there in front of the Lampedusa reception center gates. They asked to speak to the Red Cross and the United Nations. And they told them: "Our families are drowning in the sea!" That hurts *[Ahmed has tears in his eyes, his lips tremble]*. It really hurts. The coastguards took two hours to get there. We were drowning. Drowning! *[he turns to his wife, Mona, who looks weary and remains silent]*. And the coastguards didn't condescend to come to us. And this was after five hundred people had drowned off Lampedusa. It's a tragedy. The boats of death. That's what they are, the boats of death. And then… before my wife got in the boat, she said to me: "Can it be possible that somebody pays a thousand dollars to die?" Didn't you say that? *[we see Mona's frozen face]*. Can it be possible that a man pays the price of his death?

Ahmed's storytelling, as Rancière says (Ibid., p. 94)., "makes us 'see'" what he has lived through and tell us. We see the drowning and the pain in his words and on his and Mona's faces. But again, this is just a part of what we see. We see him trembling but also too well-dressed for a survivor, drinking wine with other people, at one of the stops in Bochum, Germany. Ahmed also shows his determination to keep traveling to Sweden even after being close to death: "Do what you like to me, but I won't give you my fingerprints. We didn't come all this way just to give our fingerprints in Italy," he says. His image of a passive asylum seeker is displaced but he does not suffer less because of it. We see him telling his story to a group of European activists who shelter the asylum seekers and inform them about the best ways to go safely to Copenhagen. They take time to listen closely, they pay attention. And, aware of the shipwreck's context, they also respond to it, as when one of the activists points to the hypocrisy of European countries: "If they really want to welcome them, why don't they do it through the embassies?" The scene highlights the absurdity of only being granted protection after enduring a life-risk journey, a sort of creepy prize to the ones who are able to survive. Structural violence displaces personal tragedy.

Another testimony in the documentary refers to one of the most reported and photographed shipwrecks on the shores of Lampedusa, on October 11, 2013, eight days after another one had happened in the same place. Abdallah was one of the survivors and talks about it when crossing the Grimaldi Superiore, between Italy and France. Up on the hill, there is a construction in ruins whose walls are full of names, many in Arabic, written by those who have taken the path before, and sentences like "From Egypt-Libya-Malta-Italy-France" or "Mort au passeur" ("Death to the smuggler"). While the groom talks about what happened, the others listen to the impressive numbers of drowned people. They also listen to the names of those Abdallah met and learn that he taught Palestinian songs to a little girl. Abdallah names people and registers them on the wall. With deep dark circles and a wedding suit, he speaks and is attentively listened to by the others around him, as captured by the documentary's cameras close to the bodies:

> Hossam Kalash. I stayed awake until late at night, talking to him the day before the ship sank. He was like a brother to me, even though we'd just met. I loved him a lot *[he says it while writing Hossam's name on the wall]*. Hossam had a daughter called Jenin, an incredibly beautiful little girl. The day before the shipwreck, she

> was singing. I'd taught her some Palestinian songs, such as "*Lina Builds her Tomorrows.*" And Mohammad *[he keeps writing names]*. They were both children of Hossam Kalash. God have mercy on them. This journey, let's call it the journey of October 11, 2013. Here we can write a number, let's say 250 *[he writes: "250?"]*. The missing.

Even if Alaa, Ahmed and Abdalla's stories are tragic, the context in which the three characters tell them does not fit the repertoire of images that usually accompany this type of plot, related to victimhood and passivity. It is not by avoiding telling the tragedies that the film challenges a common distribution of the sensible. The stories, it has been said, are not so different from others we are used to reading or listening to. They are mostly told in a coherent way, not stuttered as the ones recalled by African refugees seen in chapter 4. But they are more than the uttered words. What is said clashes with what is seen: well-dressed people in a wedding party crossing the borders of Europe in European cars, choosing where to go, part of an affective and supportive community. It is in this sense that Rancière (2004, p. 63) talks about the "heterology" of an aesthetic politics as "the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed: a spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings, an expression does not find its place in the system of visible coordinates where it appears." *On the Bride's Side* does not take the tragic stories out of the frame to disturb the fabric of the sensible. It instead frames them in a clash with an expected framework of meanings attributable to asylum seekers; or, better said, it frames the information of a past suffering expected of an asylum story in an unexpected context of desire in the present and imagination of a future.

On the Bride's Side's characters speak back to what has happened to them, rearranging the politics of a system of information that usually places others speaking for and about them.[170] Crucially, each one has attentive listeners during the trip. This is a fundamental aspect of all the testimonies in the film: we see some speaking and others listening, paying attention, eventually saying something back

[170] Rancière (2009, p. 96) affirms: "If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. The system of information does not operate through an excess of images, but by selecting the speaking and reasoning beings who are capable of 'deciphering' the flow of information about anonymous multitudes. The politics specific to its images consists in teaching us that not just anyone is capable of seeing and speaking."

but, most importantly, listening. There is a physical interaction that places bodies together. Although most information from these stories would probably be reproduced in future asylum applications and interviews, the characters are not just conforming to the "asylum story" when they tell them in the documentary. More important than the stories' authenticity is their storytelling, the act of sharing the stories with others.

In a book called *The Politics of Storytelling*, the anthropologist Michael Jackson affirms that storytelling is "a vital human strategy for sustaining a *sense* of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson, 2002, p. 15, my emphasis). When telling stories of oppressive events, in which they were supposed to be passive, characters replace themselves in the plot. That is not because they can change reality or be healed when sharing what happened to them but because "stories enable us to regain some purchase over the events that confound us, humble us, and leave us helpless, salvaging a sense that we have some say in the way our lives unfold" (Ibid., p. 17). This sense of agency requires an audience, a social setting in which tellers might recover a sense of being part of the story and not just taken by it. In the act of telling and sharing stories, these do not remain in the private realm. As Jackson (Ibid., p. 103) puts it, "[i]t is this sharing in the reliving of a tragedy, this sense of communing in a common loss, that gives stories their power, not to forgive or redeem the past but to unite the living in the simple affirmation that they exist, that they have survived." Stories take storytellers out of themselves and, importantly, bring them to the present when they are listened to.

> [W]ithout stories, *without listening to one another's stories,* there can be no recovery of the social, no overcoming of our separateness, no discovery of common ground or common cause. Nor can the subjective be made social. There can only remain a residue of tragic events, as disconnected from each other as the individuals who have experienced their social lives engulfed and fractured by them (Ibid., p. 104-105, emphasis in original).

On the Bride's Side does that when it places asylum seekers in a community of listeners, some who have gone through similar events and others who have not but decided to be with them. The documentary privileges the intersubjective life of stories; one that, as a porous boundary, as a skin, connects the one who tells and the ones who listen. This connection is transferred to a sharing between the film and spectators. As already highlighted in the first part of the chapter concerning the

crossing of borders, being together helps to reframe agency as relational instead of locating it on an individual will, which is usually the other side of the binary victim/hero attached to the figure of the refugee. This reframing of agency is the focus of the next section. But first I want to mention Mona Ibrahem, who is mostly quiet during the film. It is only when the group is about to cross the last border that we listen to her for a bit more time – but not much – when someone asks what she expects for the future:

> I want a good life for my children. I'm not doing it for myself. And then, I want to try and bring our children here. So that they can work, live well and have a nationality. And travel wherever they want to. Rather than having to stay in the same place, without being able to move. So they have freedom of movement.

We get closer to Mona through her silences, curious looks, smiles and exhaustion. "Mona from Syria," she writes in Arabic on the wall of the house in ruins up on the Grimaldi Superiore. She looks happy choosing outfits for the wedding party and when crossing the suspended bridge in Denmark. She looks exhausted many times, as when her husband tells others about the Mediterranean. She sleeps a lot in the car. We don't know if Mona can't or does not want to tell more. This is all part of the story she tells.[171] When in France, she takes pictures of the landscape and we learn that she never wanted to leave Syria, not even for tourism. But now Mona and her husband, Ahmed, did it. One of the wedding guests listens to them in the car:

> Ahmed: Once in 1986, I told her: One day I want to take you to France.
> And finally, I've taken her to France!
> Mona: Tell her what my answer was.
> Ahmad: She said: Impossible!
> Mona: I told him: I'm not leaving Syria!
> Ahmed: The important thing is that after 27 years, I've taken her to France.
> Mona: The important thing is that we came.

[171] Even Mona's silences that point to the difficulty in translating her experiences are shown through modes of representation (Rancière, 2009).

6.2.2
Politicizing agency

The previous chapters analyzed the debate in critical migration studies concerning (in)visibility, which is fundamental for the ways in which this dissertation deals with the possibilities of questioning the category of refugee. They looked at how, after a long history of research that victimizes migrants and refugees as speechless people, different approaches were concerned with migrants' agency. On the one hand, there is a praise for disidentification, placing migrants as subjects of imperceptibility; on the other hand, a focus on visibility and rights-claiming. Different modes of representation reflect this dichotomy. Chapter 3, for example, examined how two works of writer Valeria Luiselli, when facing stuttered stories, explicitly aim for disidentification, but are nevertheless still attached to the guarantees of recognition since framing refugees in legal terms is what may grant them protection.

Instead of just criticizing representations that corroborate this dichotomy, I have chosen, in this dissertation, to mainly look at texts and films that challenge it in different ways. As I hope to have shown, refugees play with the needs and possibilities of visibility and invisibility; they work with the ambivalence of language, being oppressed, adapting to and taking advantage of the breaches of categories. In this section, however, I examine a feature film that praises the visibility side of the dichotomy: *The Swimmers*. I aim to contrast its notion of agency to the one thought through the analysis of *On The Bride's Side*, which privileges its intersubjective dimension. Written by Sally El Hosaini, who is also the movie's director, and Jack Thorne, *The Swimmers* is based on the real story of the Syrian sisters Yusra and Sara Mardini (played, respectively, by the Lebanese sisters Nathalie and Manal Issa), who escaped the war in Syria, crossed the Mediterranean by boat and continued the journey until arriving in Germany with the help of smugglers and other asylum seekers from different parts of the world, who traveled together. Despite the similar overarching theme, *The Swimmers* and *On the Bride's Side* are very different in what they choose to show and leave behind, and how they do it. The contrast might be helpful in the effort of this chapter and the whole dissertation to disconnect cognitive and territorial borders, rethinking who and how refugees' singularities may appear under a form of life.

The Swimmers was released at the end of 2022, while I was writing about *On the Bride's Side*, years after having seen it for the first time.[172] After being shown in Venice and other festivals, *On the Bride's Side* is hardly accessible, while *The Swimmers* was streamed by Netflix, causing some commotion by the time of its release. The contrast in both films' distribution also relates to an established distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004), a politics of aesthetics with an expected configuration of what is said and seen and who can take part in it. Even before a work of art is produced, there is a politics of aesthetics in "arts' material and institutional conditions of circulation in society insofar as these – books, museums, theatres, cinemas – take part in defining the modes of presentation of objects of common experience" (Conde, 2017, p. 20, my translation). That is a relevant obstacle to any redistribution of the sensible.

The framing of a family's life in Syria during the war is *The Swimmers*' strength. The film does not begin with the crossing. It pays attention to the subject of immigration being always also of emigration (Sayad, 1998, 2004; Elliot, 2021). It takes time with the family in Syria before the girls decide to leave. The father, a former swimmer, trains both daughters hoping they will have a better career than he did. With the war's escalation, the family goes through dangerous moments, such as a missile in a swim competition and military control in the regular bus, but also joyful ones, although these get scarcer. The movie shows that war does not suddenly force everyone to leave; it affects singular lives' perspectives, desires and fears differently. A contrast is from the start set between the two sisters: Yusra, the younger, is obsessed with training so she one day can compete in the Olympic Games; Sara, on the other hand, loses interest in training when the war intensifies, more friends die each day, and life turns increasingly meaningless.

The sisters decide to migrate to Germany and convince a cousin to go with them, leaving their parents and a younger sister in Syria. They first fly as tourists to Turkey, where they pay smugglers to cross the Mediterranean by night on an overcrowded boat, whose motor stops working at some point in the trip. Water

[172] There is no easy access to *On the Bride's Side*, especially in Brazil. I thank Carolina Moulin for sending me the link to watch the film in 2015, at the time available on Al Jazeera's website; she felt how much it would speak to my concerns and sensibility. I have taken it closely with me since then. I am also thankful to Alice Elliott for showing and discussing the documentary on the graduate course Borders and Migration at Goldsmiths, University of London, which I attended in 2021-2022 as part of my Ph.D. period abroad. I had by then already decided that the film would be an important part of my dissertation, but not yet written about it.

comes inside, and the sisters jump into the sea to make the boat lighter. They both follow the boat swimming until arriving on the island of Lesbos, in Greece. Although the film's title is in the plural, its protagonist is Yusra and her unshakable will. During the crossing, Yusra imagines a pool lane to keep going, as if crossing the Mediterranean was a swimming competition. The heroic tone of the character is maintained until the end, when she competes in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro as part of the Refugee Team.

After arriving in Berlin, Yusra begins exercising regularly with gallons of water in the corridors of the huge and noisy accommodation containers for asylum seekers installed in a former airport, in a scene like Rocky Balboa's training montage. She then goes to a swimming club to ask that she and her sister be trained. After an initial refusal from the coach, Sven (Matthias Schweigerhöfer), she tells him about her swimming records, and he agrees to evaluate them. The scene unites the boldness of Yusra and the goodwill of the German coach, who becomes her trainer and convinces her to train for the Refugee Olympic Team (she hoped that the war would end, and she could compete for Syria).[173] Not without Yusra's criticism, Sara gives up swimming, which was always more her father's will than hers. By the end of the film, Sara tells her sister that she is going back to Lesbos to help newcomers who are going through what they once have been through.

The Swimmers chooses to tell a story of an asylum seeker who overcomes unimaginable difficulties and, with effort and perseverance, is successful against all odds. It chooses to remain attached to the dichotomy of victim and hero – Yusra is both – and, combined with the achievement by merit, reproduces the idea of a welcoming Europe, of a savior to the needed ones. Once again, "the refugee is likened to a martyr, someone whose suffering and pain have moral value, whose survival is providential and even implies some saving grace" (Jackson, 2002, p. 82). It reinforces that the ones who make it deserve it, which ends up justifying the absurdity of having to go through such a journey to be eventually recognized as a refugee. What about the ones who do not make it?[174]

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[173] Netflix's trailer shows the scene at the swimming club. At the time of its release in November 2022, the streaming platform's picture publicizing the film was symptomatically one of the coach, the welcoming German male of the host country, and not one of the Syrian sisters. More recently, in March 2023, the picture had been changed for one of the two sisters.

[174] In the novel *Gone, Went, Gone*, analyzed in chapter 4, Richard thinks, when listening to the stories of drownings from Africans he met in Berlin: "These days, the difference between the refugees who drown somewhere between Africa and Europe and those who don't is just a matter of

The intention here is not to undermine the achievements of both sisters, who impressively crossed the Mediterranean swimming and managed to arrive and apply for asylum in Germany, where Yusra trained to compete in Rio. The point is to think how such a story can make us know differently or reimagine a world that does not reward those who manage to survive such obstacles and pity those who die. Recognizing the existence of examples of people who have remade their lives in heroic ways, Jackson (Ibid., p. 86, emphasis in original) points out "how difficult it is to draw from these examples any *general* understanding of how the world might be changed, let alone understood."

When speaking about sideration/consideration, Macé (2018) specifically talks about becoming siderated by conditions of precarity, victimizing migrants, in contrast to a possibility of agency.[175] In principle, the swimmers' stories are of success, achievement, and not victimization. I argue, though, that they are both sides of the same coin, centered on an individualistic notion of the subject. *The Swimmers* operates through an affection of sideration that prevents one to see, even if what is shown is too visible. It bets on the commotion caused by heroic stories of suffering, resilience and individual success when choosing to highlight Yusra's achievements and her competition in Rio instead of Sara going to Lesbos, which is what she decides to make of her life. When the film is over, we read on the screen that the rest of the Mardini family later crossed the sea and now live in Berlin. Yusra competed in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games and is now a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador. Sara Mardini did return to Lesbos and, in 2018, she and colleagues "were arrested by Greek authorities on 'people-smuggling-charges' for helping refugees in Lesbos. She faces 20 years if convicted." That's all we read about her. There aren't any other details either on her work in Greece or on the legal process she is going through, related to the criminalization of helping migrants without documents in Europe.[176]

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happenstance. In this sense, every one of the African refugees here, Richard thinks, is simultaneously alive and dead." (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 200)

[175] Fassin (2018, p. 107) points to the origins of the word "precarity," which meant something granted through a favor, referring to an idea of dependence related to moral accounts of migration, depoliticizing it.

[176] The film pictures Sara as someone concerned with collectivity at two different times: when she takes the initiative of jumping into the Mediterranean, being followed by Yusra; and when, against the will of her sister, she separates from her to cross a border in a convoy of cars since each vehicle needed an English-speaking person. But her work in Greece with other arriving asylum seekers is not there to be seen.

On the Bride's Side begins where *The Swimmers* ends. It leaves behind the sideration with incredible stories of deservingness and focuses on the consideration created by people who together build relations to circumvent an oppressive regime. Instead of moralizing the matter with moving examples that provoke sympathy, and consequently apart us from the suffering of others (Sontag, 2003), it politicizes it when focusing not on the bravery of asylum seekers and the goodwill of host countries, but on a shared responsibility and the criminalization of help in Europe. That does not mean a disregard for agency, but treating subjects as singularities with intersubjective lives enmeshed in power relations. There is a permanent tension between subjection and subjectification when refugees cross borders in their invented wedding party.

The documentary's characters managed to arrive in Europe while many who were by their side died. They don't deserve more because of this. And they have managed to travel *within* Europe because, as seen throughout this chapter, a transnational network has been with them with material support, information, affection and open ears. When it shows the need for a transnational network that questions the law and finds ways of breaking it together with the most vulnerable people, *On the Bride's Side* substitutes morality for politics. It does not rely on the dichotomy of victim/hero, on the story of the refugees who, on their own, overcome unthinkable obstacles, as it is common in biographical accounts of the matter. As Woolley states (2020, p. 160), the film depends more on relationality than on empathy. Agency, then, does not rely on the will and deservingness of people, but in a combination of valuing people's desires, taking seriously that they choose where to apply for asylum, and the need that there is a collective formation to creatively put forward these desires, which otherwise would be very hardly achieved. It is an example of "a shift toward refugeetude, a means by which refugee subjects – people who have been touched by the processes of violent displacement and border control – come to understand, articulate, and resist their conditions" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 112). Despite that, structural violence and subjection are not erased.

6.3
Drawing the line: politics as naming

This chapter dwelt on the documentary *On the Bride's Side* to address the theme of contemporary displaced people from Syria by placing them in need of recognition and, at the same time, changing their expected roles as passive asylum seekers/refugees. The film manages to reconfigure who refugees are when it shows suffering people who have gone through intolerable journeys being able to recount these for themselves, being listened to, and moving ahead. They negotiate with expectations and categories, displacing the common sense that someone is either a victim of war, who should accept what the hosting state offers them – a refugee –, *or* someone who is opportunistically searching for better conditions of life – a migrant. They are both escaping war and willing to choose a place they think has the best opportunities to rebuild their lives at the same time. For four days, they are typical and atypical asylum seekers. If they conform to the dramatic stories of asylum seekers when they remember what happened in the Mediterranean, they also "subvert viewer's narrative expectations about the inherent drama of the refugee experience" (Woolley, 2020) when they manage to cross European borders without any incident as the groom, bride and guests of a wedding party. Their stories are both exemplary and extraordinary.

During the trip, borders are present though not visible, and the wedding guests manage to cross them without being *made* migrants/asylum seekers (Tazzioli, 2019). The film brilliantly questions how practices of territorial bordering connect to categorical borderings, which reproduce the inclusion/exclusion pattern of the modern international. The notion of bordering as a process makes borders open to reconfiguration, not only spatially but also cognitively, destabilizing the convergence between *nomos* and space. The refugees in the film are neither where they are supposed to be nor who they are supposed to be. They are unbecoming refugees, whose political agency is itself in redefining those "supposed to be" demarcations. Politics works in the disputes allowed by the porosity and provisionality of boundaries; it works in the vacuum of language, as this dissertation has been suggesting.

If the wedding plot changes migratory categories, it is nevertheless a temporary renaming, because borders depend on a constant renegotiation between

crossing and reinforcing (Vila, 2000). As an example of the instability of those demarcations, the film informs us that after arriving safely in Sweden, Alaa and his son Manar were sent back to Italy, where their fingerprints had been taken. Those who have not gone through the Dublin Regulation's return system, on their side, must live and work in Sweden, where they applied for asylum. They cannot change their minds. That is true even if recognized as refugees: they can travel but don't have the right of residency and work all over the EU as other legal residents.

That is why Picozza (2017) expands the term "Dubliners," usually meant for those who left the "responsible member state" and were sent back, to encompass all refugees inside the EU. Their rights of movement are restricted even after recognition, in sharp contrast to citizens of the EU states, who can work or live anywhere in the union. "[S]tretching the label," says Picozza (2017, p. 233), "endeavors to 'unthink' migration categories as epistemological devices, analyzing the role of the law in shaping them." In this case, regarding rights of residency and work, it stretches the distance between the categories of refugee and citizen and approximates the distance between refugees and asylum seekers. If "there is literally no way to be an 'illegal refugee'," as Haddad (2008, p. 28) states, some asylum seekers' conditions do not change when they are recognized as refugees.

At the same time, navigating in the vacuum of a category is also what allows it to be challenged again and again. While European borders' reconfigurations can have oppressive consequences for displaced people, they can also be unmade, even if provisionally, with the help of a transnational network in the documentary. The map presented at the beginning of *On the Bride's Side*, which is a concrete instantiation of a modern cartographic imaginary, changes as the wedding convoy walks and drives along European roads. In every stop in a different city, the characters' experiences exceed bounded spaces and produce boundaries other than the ones discriminating asylum seekers from citizens. Their suffering as refugees is not erased, but it is connected in a chain of images and conversations that show characters' both tragedies and hopes *at the same time*: they tell what they have gone through while they are going ahead on their trip. They keep moving while remembering.

The simultaneity makes them neither victims nor heroes but desiring subjects despite all oppressions, even though this *despite* is not small or undermined. Again, they are the typical asylum seekers and they are not. Stories of

desperation are told and heard during a trip to Sweden, which is tense and risky, but also a celebration that points to a future, to stories to come. Abdallah Sallam, Manar Bjermi, Alaa Bjermi, Ahmed Abed and Mona Ibrahem not only have "the right to escape" (Mezzadra, 2004, 2015), related to something to be left in the past, but also a "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, 2015): the chance for finding a name in a future plot, which depends on imagination. In the present, their storytelling relates to past events but takes them out of themselves, mediating a relationship with the outside world. That is more than "just" naming, as Richard, the character from the novel *Go, Went, Gone*, would recognize. As Jackson (2002, p. 23) affirms, "the important thing is not how we name these other worlds but how narrative enables us to negotiate an existential balance between ourselves and such spheres of otherness."

When redistributing refugees' proper places for unbecoming ones, *On the Bride's Side* makes us know differently, disputing the names in the plots of asylum seekers, and there lies its politics. The film entails an aesthetic separation (Rancière, 2008), a break in the usual narratives of the Mediterranean crossings, making us speculate who refugees are in ways different from what the law determines. It is a work related to other images and stories of these crossings that were downplayed in the visual imaginary of contemporary migration exactly because they displace the victim/hero binary guiding the plots.[177] In this sense, *On the Bride's Side* is a documentary but also a work of fiction, which means "establishing new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now" (Rancière, 2009, p. 102).[178] It crosses a seesaw through a wall.

[177] It often comes to my mind the pictures of the march in September 2015, in which hundreds of asylum seekers left Hungary and walked together by foot, as a collective, to arrive at their desired destiny, Germany.

[178] Rancière (2004, p. 38) affirms that a documentary can be able to create an even stronger fictional invention than some features films that are "readily devoted to a certain stereotype of actions and characters."

7
Imagining words and worlds

Tropeçavas nos astros desastrada
Quase não tínhamos livros em casa
E a cidade não tinha livraria
Mas os livros que em nossa vida entraram
São como a radiação de um corpo negro
Apontando pra expansão do Universo
Porque a frase, o conceito, o enredo, o verso
(E, sem dúvida, sobretudo o verso)
É o que pode lançar mundos no mundo
(Caetano Veloso, *Livros*)

"I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker. These are not simple words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so," says Saleh Omar, the protagonist of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2022 [2001], p. 4). Coming from Zanzibar, the elderly man arrives in England with a fake passport under another name. When an immigration officer at Gatwick Airport, London, interviews him, he pretends not to speak English, following a piece of advice he later starts to question. He remains speechless and repeats only two words: "Refugee. Asylum." Differently from the protagonist in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The American Embassy*, who refuses to perform the victimized character but tells readers exactly what she could have told in her asylum claim, Saleh Omar plays a role to fit into the "asylum story" (Woolley, 2017) and be recognized as a refugee. Meanwhile, the novel narrates a rich life that exceeds any possible framing in asylum interviews, intake questionnaires or catalogs of questions. It shows that refugee and asylum seeker are not simple words by leading readers back to the man's life in Zanzibar, with its old history of openness to non-Europeans and not-so-old colonial relationship with Great Britain. As Opondo (2021, p. 96) states, "Omar offers a narrative cartography of beautiful things and human pains that enables us to capture the complex Afro-Asian encounters, colonial displacements, and entanglement of beings in Indian Ocean worlds." In doing so, "the image of the asylum-seeker that his flashback

provides does not comport with the humanitarian narratives that privilege the image of the refugee or asylum-seeker as a generality of helpless victims, speechless emissaries, or purveyors of familiar testimonies" (Ibid., p. 100).

In the lexicon of terms simplified by habit, *refugee* is an exception legally recognized by the international system of states until citizenship is restored and, through citizenship, humanity might be achieved. In a paradoxical order that produces and exceptionalizes migration, *refugee* has been an administrable legal figure since the middle of the 20th Century and can only exist as the consequence of a state's failure. As a simple word, *refugee* is an ideal type of non-belonging, a "figure of lack" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 113) opposed to the citizen, therefore temporary even if someone remains forever a refugee. The abstraction leading to the suspension of a concrete life is already implied when simply categorizing someone as such: if refugees are not political subjects, the law can suspend their time until political life begins. That is why, as Appadurai (2015, 2019) states, refugees have a plot but not a name. Theirs is a predictable plot of suffering and victimhood that must be performed until reinserted into citizenship's inclusion-exclusion continuum.

This dissertation first related the inevitability of the exceptional figure of the refugee in the modern international order of states, where everyone has a proper place, to a politics of knowledge according to which names are also bounded stable entities. The possibility of apprehending, measuring and representing the world is a consequence of its separation from man by a clear boundary, which shapes an objective externality that can be brought in, internalized. This split allows the modern subject to be sovereign, taming unpredictability through knowledge (Walker, 2009, 2017). A politics of categorization in which meanings are stable sustains the appearance of regularity between nation-states and of homogeneity inside them. Both cognitive and spatial boundaries must be predictable, and any movement exceeding that predictability must be erased (the refugee as a figure of lack) or internalized (the citizen as a political subject). The production of migrants as both constitutive and an excess of the modern international is intrinsically connected to the bordering of categories free from ambiguities that, in the case of refugees, indicate a speechless figure without a name.

That is how Saleh Omar, pretending not to speak English, "became an instrument for other people's contended stories" (Gurnah, 2022 [2001], p. 64), as

he narrates, hearing in silence what others said about him, even if he had not uttered a word except for: "Refugee. Asylum." To grasp the plot, those words should be enough. Any other added word could change their expected meaning. "'Tell them nothing more than that you want asylum, nothing more.' That was what the man who sold me the ticket told me. He insisted on this" (Ibid., p. 143), Saleh Omar tells Latif, an old acquaintance from Zanzibar who had arrived in England decades before also as a refugee, but from communist East Germany. Latif asks why, and then has a hint: "'Without English you are even more a stranger, a refugee, I suppose, more convincing,' he guessed. 'You're just a condition, without even a story'" (Ibid.). Before Saleh Omar admitted to the legal adviser that he actually spoke English, she was trying to find him a translator, "someone at the University of London who is an expert on your area" (Ibid., p. 65), she says, even without knowing which language he spoke. He thinks:

> An expert in my *area*, someone who has written books about me no doubt, who knows all about me, more than I know about myself. He will have visited all the places of interest and significance in my *area*, and will know their historical and cultural context when I will be certain never to have seen them and will only have heard vague myths and popular tales about them. He will have slipped in and out of my *area* for decades, studying me and noting me down, explaining me and summarizing me, and I would have been unaware of his busy existence. (Ibid., emphasis in original)

A novel like *By the Sea* won't change the framing of refugees just by denouncing their transformation into a research area. It should do more than that, and it does, as pointed out in the beginning of this closing chapter. The scene described above helps illustrate the transformation of the refugee into an "epistemic object" (Malkki, 1995) and how it relates to a system of international states where each one has a proper place and the "asylum story" is the only one through which a place can be regained. Nevertheless, as Saleh Omar says, *refugee* and *asylum seeker* are not simple words. As complex words, they name singularities whose experiences exceed and challenge the stable plot of the modern spatial/cognitive imaginary, as the stories examined in this dissertation show. In their ambivalences, they reveal that "legal boundaries were never as clear as the language of law, replicated in political, security and academic discourses, seem to portray" (Basaran and Guild, 2017, p. 277). Once we add other names to "refugee-asylum," their meanings become less stable.

Regarding the problematization of the connection between *nomos* and space, brought up in chapter 2 and briefly recalled here, and concerned with *refugee* as a category that helps sustain the modern international in its place, the dissertation turned to the tension between subject and a world to be known and internalized, instead of turning to the more commonly researched tension between citizenship and humanity. It did it by analyzing fictional and non-fictional narratives that first, complexify the relationship of people named refugees with the name they are given; and second, show the limitations of language and also of escaping language. When thematizing refugeeness, contemporary narratives have a clear difficulty distancing themselves from the "horror" stories, in view of the actual violence involved in migratory displacements and the responses to it. As Woolley (2020. p. 12) notes, there is an explicit awareness of representations that "while attempting to tell the unheard stories of refugees and asylum seekers also express a degree of self-reflexive anxiety about the possibility of doing so." She defends that the self-consciousness of alternative narratives might evidence refugees' effacement, allowing "the traces of what is not, or cannot be, present in the text to emerge" (Ibid., p. 21). I stressed that anxiety in chapter 3, pointing to the difficulty of abandoning a category that still protects people while excluding many others with similar experiences of displacement.

As mentioned above, it is not enough to defend the category's necessity or denounce its limitations in order to frame refugees differently. As seen in Valeria Luiselli's work, the concern with how to approach migrants' lives does not prevent her from reproducing stories as portrayed by the media or NGO's mortality reports. Self-awareness does not guarantee that familiar categories are destabilized and refugees' lives are politicized, in the sense that meanings usually attributed to them are disturbed. But narratives can foster politicizing practices by exploring the tensions between historical time and personal experiences, or, as Das (2007, p. 2) says, the "slippery relation between the collective and the individual, between genre and individual emplotment of stories." In a 2012 lecture about the novel and its relationship with information and narration, included in a posthumous volume, Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia argues that the novel "assumes the tension between what would be a complex story, whose motives do not allow fast moral decisions, and a label that implies an immediate sense of evaluation" (Piglia, 2022, p. 161, my translation). He compares the literary world of mixed and complex

causes with the world of journalism, which requires simplifications, labels and simple causalities. While I think the difference is not so straightforward and the medium, as stressed, does not guarantee an ambivalent or non-ambivalent portrait of the world, the extended time of a narrative can favor it to complexify life's flow of "instants-now" (Lispector, 2015 [1973]) and put them to the fore, humanizing the interval between beginning and end (Kermode, 2000 [1967]). Language can work as a skin, as porous borders that leave traces of an untranslatable excess, not so frequently allowed in journalistic (and academic) discourses.

Refugees as "figures of lack" exist in a modern international that erases the conditions to produce the supposedly stable borders that delimit both language and space. According to this view, there is a pre-political sphere, and politics only exists after the foundation of sovereignty, in the relationship between constituted subjects and their sovereign (Shaw, 2004). This depoliticizing move, which produces bounded subjects through measurement and representation, is challenged when this production and the appearance of its inevitability are highlighted. It is challenged when, for example, Richard, the protagonist of Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, changes from being the researcher whose objects of research are refugees to a man who affectively relates to them and is questioned back, a man whose life is crisscrossed by other storylines, as seen in chapter 4. When problematizing the separation between subject and world through refugees' experiences, the dissertation also aims to problematize a politics of knowledge that establishes a clear border as an absolute division, which the refugee is a symptom of. It places politics in the never finished formation of refugees' subjectivities, in the permanent tension between subjection and subjectification.

If a border just divides, it depends on a logic of inclusion-exclusion that keeps guiding much research and political discourses concerned with social rights, violence in border regimes and possibilities of resistance. That is why the stories analyzed here do not merely confirm or refuse the expected plot but move through its ambivalences. If language is key to questioning the spatial regulative ideal of political belonging, it is through its instability that different stories can be told. People called refugees negotiate with the category and show that more than a divide, it can also connect them to people with similar subject positions or whose loss is shared (Ahmed, 1999). The stories examined here do not deny that *refugee* as a legal category can still be necessary to guarantee people's survival and protection.

At the same time, they show it is inadequate, insufficient, and oppressive because it abstracts people's lives and freezes their time. Besides the attentiveness to the historical time in which characters are inscribed, narratives' politics lie in privileging other temporalities and rhythms of lives whose time is, by categorical definition, suspended; and in getting close to unfamiliar names that are difficult to approach exactly because they are not visible to us, which requires the work of imagination. The politicizing move of destabilizing the clear separation between subject and world is crafted through a rearrangement of the perceptual field that shifts refugees' proper places (Rancière, 2004, 2007, 2008).

Focusing on the entanglements between subject and world through narratives of encounters, the dissertation problematizes the binary visibility versus invisibility that corresponds to a supposed clear border. Many migration studies focus on questioning citizenship rights and spatial political belonging without problematizing the separation between subject and world that creates migrants/ refugees as deviances in the first place. On the one hand, there is work on migrants' visibility, claiming rights even if through an "activist citizenship." On the other hand, the praise for disidentification runs the risk of reinforcing migrants/refugees as figures, bodies divorced from the meanings people attribute to their experiences. To politicize refugees' agency, I argue it is more important to understand the conditions for becoming visible, how they navigate with visibility and invisibility in their daily lives and name experiences through this navigation. Migrants are neither names without bodies in the rights-representation axiom nor disidentified bodies without names. Between an activist citizen and "being everyone" (Papadopoulos et al., 2008), they name and rename themselves and others in everyday practices, participating in "the dispute concerning the relations of words to things," to refer once more to what Rancière (2004, p. 40) defines as "the heart of politics."

I proposed to look at the porosity of spatial boundaries through the porosity of cognitive boundaries shown in the lives of unbecoming refugees, by which I mean refugees who displace their proper places, and in doing so, unmake refugeeness in an eventful everyday. While pointing to the need to challenge territorial and cognitive boundaries that require a fixed place for refugees, the dissertation recognizes that the separation between subject and world is not to be transcended: here I am, finishing a dissertation, trying to make some sense of a

puzzle in over 200 pages written in a non-native language. If there is no way out of language, I propose to fully embrace it. Language's refusal does not mean transcending categories; it will eventually lead to new ones. Maybe it is already time that the category of *refugee* is abandoned, even if we don't have guarantees of what will come next. But the suggestion here is to play in its vacuum. It is to understand how the possibility to question the place of figures usually represented as out of place lies in the tension between language's transparency and opacity. It does not lie in the simple refusal/replacement of representation, but in the multiplication of forms representations (Rancière, 2007), in "the joining of partial views and halting voices" (Haraway, 1991, p. 196).

This dissertation gathered stories of unbecoming refugees-asylum seekers who, like Saleh Omar, say it, in different ways: "These are not simple words." They unmake refugeeness through their voices, not authoritative utterances (Das, 2007). They do it by hesitating or stuttering when narrating their violent crossings through the desert or the sea; by exchanging the useful objects a refugee must carry for useless ones; by recalling the way a father learned to dry his son's back with a towel or bought blue robes for Eid Mubarak; by playing piano for the first time or redrawing a gate that had been already drawn many times, in a distant place; by sharing a cause or sharing a language; by building relationships without understanding a word of what the other says; by dancing, cooking, laughing and crying together; by imagining a wedding party that magically prevents borders to be enacted; by sharing the magic and the horror with others who listen to them; by finding breaches where some future can enter, like an unexpected pink seesaw, despite being told all the time: "not yet." Even if real, the stories gathered in this dissertation, as pointed out at the end of chapter 6, are all fictional in "establishing new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now" (Rancière, 2009, p. 102).

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Going back to the territorial border that opened this dissertation, between Mexico and the United States, I give another brief example of an artwork that deals with the representation of migrants. *Hostile Terrain 94* gathers over 3,200 tags with the names of people who died crossing the border in the Sonoran desert between 2000 and 2020. The toe tags, used for identification in mortuaries, are pinned on a

circa 20-foot-long map of that border zone, according to the exact place where each person died. Names, age, sex, cause of death and state of the found bodies were hand-written in manila tags, while circa 1,000 orange tags were left unwritten for the unidentified people. Since 2019, the project has been shown in around 80 different cities in the United States and in the world, organized by the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP), a collective founded by the anthropologist Jason De León in 2009 to develop research, arts and education initiatives related to migration, especially at the U.S.-Mexico border, where the project has helped to identify people who disappeared crossing the desert.[179] The installation's title refers to the Prevention Through Deterrence immigration policy adopted by President Bill Clinton's government in 1994, which increased border security in urban areas and was followed by a rise of the number of deaths in the desert, since migrants started taking more dangerous paths.

The installation plays with the binary of migrants' categorization/ disidentification and representation of people who died crossing the desert. First, it mixes identified tags with nameless ones; second, it accumulates a large number of tags, creating a volume in space that makes it impossible to read them all. In this visual arrangement, thousands of names, places of birth and causes of death remain invisible despite having been written down, while some empty tags are clearly visible in the foreground. The work shows in a straightforward way that being seen does not depend only on identification. Named or not, they all refer to bodies of people who did not survive when trying to cross the Sonoran desert, searching for a better life in the United States. But the installation does not make us move forward in imagining and reimagining the lives of those who keep crossing the border.

It is not surprising that the body is almost an obsession in research on migration, in view of the high rates of deaths and disappearances of migrants in displacement. But wouldn't the focus on deadly tragedies in the desert, the Mediterranean Sea and in many other territorial and non-territorial borders confirm a speechless figure instead of challenging it? I don't mean to disregard those tragedies. As I hope it is clear by now, and considering the stories I chose to compose this dissertation, the violence of migratory displacements should be evidenced. I mean to suggest that methodologically, the portrait of refugees as

[179] Details on the project are available on: https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/hostileterrain94. Last access: April 1, 2023.

nameless bodies, as "the unspeakable, the unviable, the non-narrativizable" figure (Dillon, 1998), might be reinforced in the repetition of tragic narratives, even when self-aware that their restrictive character doesn't live up to the stuttering, shuffling and shattering of life experiences. That is common in representations of violent crossings. In the art installation *End of Dreams*, for example, Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen created 48 sculptures of concrete, made to appear as if bodies were wrapped in bags, and placed them in a bay in Calabria, Italy. How far can a work like that really challenge a way of seeing refugees as bodies or figures? Wouldn't it be another mode of representation that chooses to represent absence and death?

In the keynote lecture at the online conference *Consent Not to Be a Single Being: Worlding through the Caribbean*[180] on December 1, 2021, Katherine McKittrick examined how the focus on the objectification of black bodies can maintain in its place a system of knowledge that produces objectification in the first place, serving that system instead of challenging it. With a work concerned with the struggles of black women and their relation to place, McKittrick referred to how academic research often reinforced the existence of black bodies instead of black people, specifically when ignoring any difference between the time of slavery and the present time. While the theme of her lecture was the environment, eco-crisis and black life, it clearly speaks to the worries of this dissertation in not essentializing migrants through a description of "subjugated bodies." I reproduce an excerpt of her lecture: [181]

> The preoccupation with describing subjugated bodies is suffocating. Both the environment and the racialized body become a singular analytic site of degradation. Biological determinism is normalized and spatialized and conversations that draw attention to relational and transnational eco-crisis and fighting this transnational eco-crisis, these conversations are foreclosed. I'm not minimizing environmental racism and the way it negatively impacts upon marginalized communities in very violent and material ways. And I'm not foreclosing activist work by black and other communities that's related to the environment and environmental catastrophe. Instead, I'm raising questions about methodology in scholarship about black geographies, black ecologies and blackness in the environment. I believe it's

[180] The online conference was organized by Hyundai Tate Research Center Transnational in collaboration with the University of the Arts, London, and the Transnational and Transcultural Art Culture Exchange Network. It proposed to depart from the works of Caribbean thinkers Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant and Stuart Hall to think about the "legacies of Caribbean thought on global art histories, public culture and activism" and how they could transform our way to relate to the world. The conference was related to Tate Britain's exhibition *Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s – Now.*

[181] The keynote lecture, *Charmaine's Wires*, is available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxARZXhsvHM. Last access: March 31, 2023.

> important to repeatedly signal that when dehumanization is the central theoretical frame, if the method is to describe and prove racism, it will probably lead to the conclusion that black people are less than human. If the method is to describe and prove racism, black people become analytical objects that prove that black people are less than human. The lesson we can learn from some of these analytical pitfalls is that we must carefully work through the racial underpinnings of ecological crisis, which can inadvertently or intentionally legitimize dehumanization. (McKittrick, 2021b)

Following McKittrick, I consider that when dehumanization is the central theoretical frame, if the method is to describe and prove migrants/refugees' oppression and objectification, it will probably lead to the conclusion that migrants/refugees are less than human. In another text, McKittrick (2021a, p. 106) stresses that her goal is not to "replace the dead with the living" but to question: "How might we shift our methodological questions so that we do not end up in an analytical bind that affirms rather than undoes racial violence?" (Ibid., p. 107).[182] I similarly suggest that unmaking refugeeness requires other methodological questions that, besides denouncing oppression, look for voice in the body. Voice won't restore lives lost, it won't replace dead with living, but can stretch imaginations of how to sort a world out when it crashes down on you, creating possibilities of inhabiting it again. Appadurai (2019, p. 564) underlines how migrants' stories are usually "stories of abjection and supplication, and these stories are not easy to convert into the narratives of application and aspiration." When mechanisms of state control and the security-migration relationship are highlighted, even as a means to criticize securitization and the oppression of border regimes, there remains little space for finding any voice.

In the last decades, most migration studies in International Relations have focused on bordering mechanisms independent from discursive practices. My aim was to somehow reconnect the symbolic dimension to non-discursive mechanisms of control, names and bodies, and place political theory closer to humanities than sociology. As sociological categories, refugees, economic migrants, illegal migrants, guest workers, asylum seekers and tolerated become self-referential domains of studies of an *area* of expertise, as the character Saleh Omar ironizes. To approach migration not as a bounded and self-referential research area there is a

[182] In *Failure (My Head Was Full of Misty Fumes of Doubt)*, one of the essays in the book *Dear Science and Other Stories*, McKittrick exposes how the algorithmic methodology previously determines the outcomes of questions asked about black life, or, more precisely, how it is related to a "mathematics of black lifelessness." (2021a, p. 113)

need to approach an unfamiliarity that, because not visible to us, can only be imagined. Imagination is a fundamental condition for challenging representational politics that looks for inclusion in schemes of power, even though not able to escape from it. This is, I suggest, a politicizing practice: speculate about who refugees are beyond this name without disregarding what also makes them refugees. As McKittrick (2021b) affirms, when defending radical reading practices, "unfamiliarity is (…) an invitation to learn rather than to know totally" and "the lesson is to share an analytic that is committed to undoing harm, rather than repeatedly describing harm."

It is a difficult exercise to get closer to what is unfamiliar without closure, leaving something uncanny in it. There is no successful formula for it, as Rancière stresses in many of his texts about representation. But avoiding language is certainly not a possibility for escaping language's pitfalls. That is something even Hobbes, the nominalist political theorist, admitted while impossibly trying to fill language's vacuum with the sovereign. In his argumentative thought that goes from senses/time to names/fixity, Hobbes (1997, p. 31, chap. VI) defines imagination as "the first internall beginning of all Voluntary Motion," the beginning of internal motions that cause passions, always related to movement towards something, desire; or from something, aversion. As a motion, imagination should be tamed in a *polis* without room for contingency. Bringing contingency back to politics requires embracing the inconstant signification of names and imagination for a future that, as Hobbes says, is always "a fiction of the mind" (Ibid., p. 18, chap. III.)

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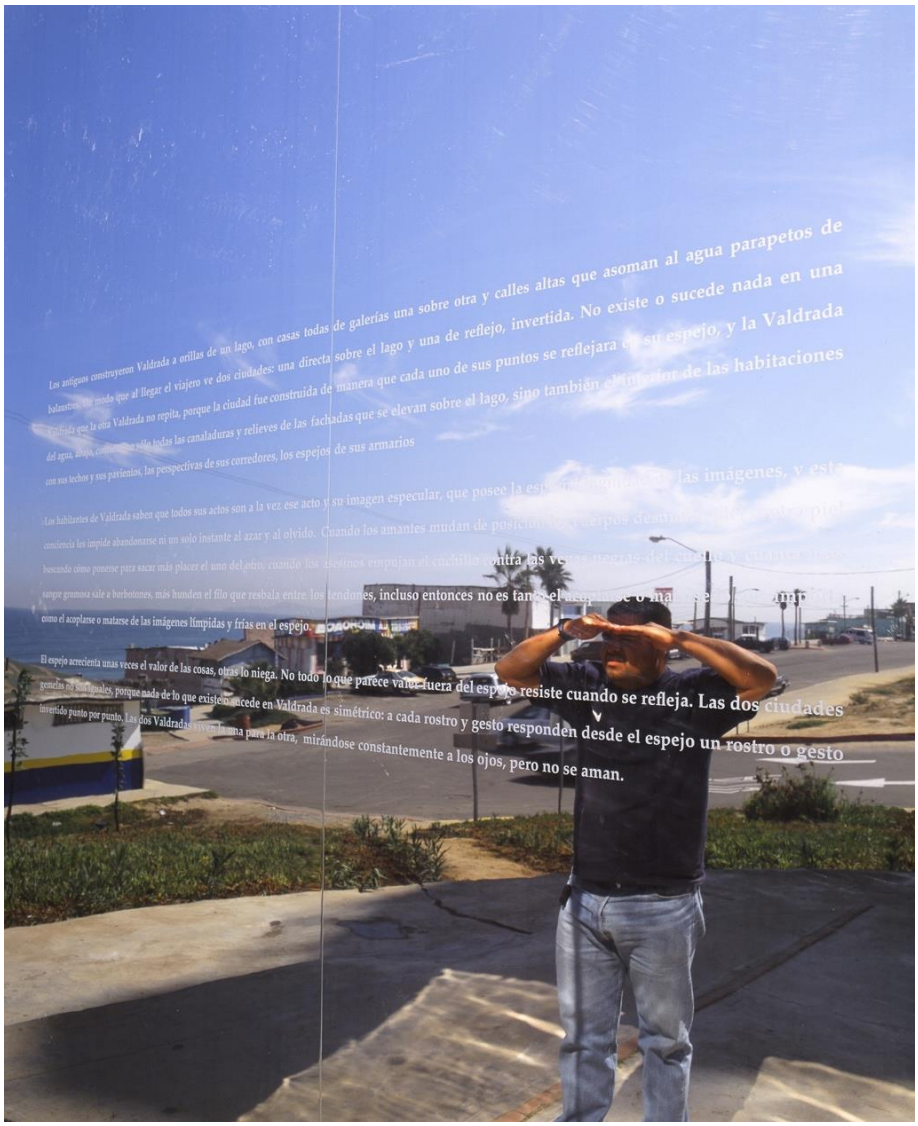
I end the dissertation with another artistic reference, also related to the territorial border between Mexico and the United States. In *Picturing Paradise* (2000), Valeska Soares placed a mirrored surface on both sides of the border's section marked by a wire fence: in Tijuana Beach, Mexico, and in San Diego's Border Field State Park, United States. From afar, the polished stainless-steel planes give the impression of an opening to the other side, but when viewers get closer, what they see is themselves and the landscape surrounding them. The fence is still there, behind the mirror, blocking the passage but also allowing some view of the environment and the people on the other side through its holes. Soares, a Brazilian artist who lives in the United States, printed on each surface a stretch from Italo

Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*, which tells the story of two twins but asymmetrical cities: Valdrada and its reflected image. On the U.S. side, it is printed legibly in English and reversed in Spanish, as if the latter was a mirror's reflection; on the Mexican side, the legible version is in Spanish, and the inverted text is in English. As Ostrander (2006) states, "[o]n either side of the fence, the reversed text created the illusion of transparency, as if the viewer were looking through the mirror to the surface facing the opposite country."[183]

Picturing Paradise complexifies the tension between visibility and invisibility, but it does more. It is exemplary of Soares' work, which, as I wrote elsewhere, "operates in a space between concrete stories and abstractions, between what is marked by time and what can be re-determined" (Velasco, 2017, p. 70). The installation is sensual and conceptual, body and name. It puts people on both sides of the border in its center. Looking at the mirrors, they have the impression of seeing ahead, but they are the ones reflected. The text in reverse indicates that something not so different is on the other side, although it cannot be properly read. Similarly, the other country's landscape can only be seen through the wire's holes, but enough to notice it does not change much just because a fence divides space. The artwork suggests that there is always something unreachable over there, even if very close. It is this unreachability that leaves space for imagination, though. Importantly, imagination is not to be found somewhere else, in a transcendent move, but in one's own image. That image can even be the one of a refugee.

[183] Images of the project are available on the website of the initiative for the production of public art inSITE, for which Soares' piece was created: https://insiteart.org/people/valeska-soares. Last access: April 3, 2023.


Los antiguos construyeron Valdrada a orillas de un lago, con casas todas de galerías una sobre otra y calles altas que asoman al agua parapetos de
balaustres. Toda que al llegar el viajero ve dos ciudades: una directa sobre el lago y una de reflejo, invertida. No existe o sucede nada en una
Fin Feda que la otra Valdrada no repita, porque la ciudad fue construida de manera que cada uno de sus puntos se reflejara en su espejo, y la Valdrada
del agua, aloja, con [illegible] todas las canaladuras y relieves de las fachadas que se elevan sobre el lago, sino también el interior de las habitaciones
con sus techos y sus pavimentos, las perspectivas de sus corredores, los espejos de sus armarios
Los habitantes de Valdrada saben que todos sus actos son a la vez ese acto y su imagen especular, que posee la est[illegible] las imágenes, y esta
conciencia les impide abandonarse ni un solo instante al azar y al olvido. Cuando los amantes mudan de posición [illegible]
buscando cómo ponerse para sacar más placer el uno del otro, cuando los asesinos empujan el cuchillo contra las ve[illegible]
sangre grumosa sale a borbotones, más hunden el filo que resbala entre los tendones, incluso entonces no es tan[illegible]
como el acoplarse o matarse de las imágenes límpidas y frías en el espejo.
El espejo acrecienta unas veces el valor de las cosas, otras lo niega. No todo lo que parece valer fuera del espejo resiste cuando se refleja. Las dos ciudades
gemelas no [illegible] porque nada de lo que existe en Valdrada es simétrico: a cada rostro y gesto responden desde el espejo un rostro o gesto
invertido punto por punto. Las dos Valdradas [illegible] una para la otra, mirándose constantemente a los ojos, pero no se aman.

8
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8.1
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8.2
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