

<e **visual ethnography**



VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025

ISSN: 2281-1605

Moving images across borders: visual and digital resonances of human (im)mobilities

Edited by Chiara Pilotto and Bruno Riccio



VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

ISSN 2281-1605

Associazione per la conservazione
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Visual Ethnography is indexed in
Scopus and Web of Science
ANVUR Rivista di Classe A,
Macrosettore 11/A5
Patronage University of Basilicata,
Italy

Cover Photo: *Equilibrio*,

Kanadjiguila, Bamako, 2021. Photo by
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**Introduction. Moving images across borders:
technology, visibility and (im)mobility in
anthropological inquiry**

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dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-171

Abstract

The encounter with the subjective experiences of borders and mobility in the world we live in has highlighted how central the practices of image production and circulation are in shaping those experiences and their ordinariness. With this special issue we want to shape a perspective that attempts to grasp the mutual embedding of human mobility and the mobility of images. The centrality of mobility as a heuristic concept invites us, on the one side, to embrace an historical perspective in the anthropological study of media and visibility, and on the other, to avoid limiting it to the realm of "migrations" and migration studies. Furthermore, this issue questions visibility, (im)mobility and inequality from a temporal perspective that seeks to connect past to future: if images are, in many ways, incontrovertible outputs of history, they are also a powerful ground for political imagination and rising ideas of future. Which is the specific weight of visibility in all of this? And how is this linked to media practices and new technologies? The contributions to this issue address these questions in different ways. Beyond the variety of approaches, however, a special attention is given to the affective dimension of images, that is what they convey through – but also beyond – representation.

Keywords

Ethnography, technology, images, (im)mobility, affect

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The focus of this special issue stems from our research interests and ethnographic work on migrations, asylum policies, mobility regimes, and racisms. Ethnography both as a research practice and a mode of reflecting on (anthropological) representation, has led us to combine these research interests with the issue of images: the encounter with the daily life and the subjective experiences of borders and mobility in the world we live in, has highlighted how central the practices of image production and circulation are in shaping those experiences and their ordinariness. Initially, our aim was to explore the multiple connections between African diasporas, digital technologies and images going beyond the compartmentalisation of research, and rather intersecting the perspectives of political anthropology, anthropology of migrations, visual and digital anthropology.¹ In this special issue the purpose of this analysis broadened to go further and enhance a perspective that attempts to grasp the mutual embedding of human mobility and the mobility of images. Simultaneously, our focus on media practices as social practices for producing, circulating and receiving visual or audiovisual contents has not been limited to the so-called “digital age”, but has embraced traditional media and mass media as well as the internet and social media. Although our reflections are certainly situated in the recent and growing anthropological interest on media and “mediascapes” (Appadurai 1996; Bargna 2018; Biscaldi and Matera 2019, 2022, 2024; Ginsburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002; Mangiameli and Zito 2021; Miller et alii 2016) as essential dimensions of modernization and globalization, we believe that the centrality of mobility as a heuristic concept invites us, on the one side, to embrace an historical perspective in the anthropological study of media and visuality, and on the other, to avoid limiting it to the realm of “migrations” and migration studies.

In this sense, this special issue is certainly inspired by the “mobility turn” that has influenced the social sciences in recent decades (Scheller and Urry 2006; Riccio 2019) to avoid treating stability as the natural state of affairs and criticising the idea that sedentarism represents normality while mobility represents deviance and therefore some kind of problem. This more comprehensive approach includes not only geographical movement in time but also social and existential mobility (Hage 2009, 2021). Indeed, migrants’ subjectivities and movement are closely connected to imaginaries, hopes and fantasies about social becoming. Secondly, mobility is conceived as a fundamental dimension of human experience, which as an analytic category embraces different phenomena such as labour migrations, forced displacement, colonial settlements, and so on. Our attempt is thinking together different kinds of human mobility (Salazar 2020) through the shared ground of their visual dimension and media practices: images move with people, and people make images move. Like the social studies of media and social media have shown in last decades, human mobility and cultural flows have been more

¹ The project of this special issue stems from the ethnographic work our research team conducted at the University of Bologna within the national project PRIN 2017 *GAF-Genealogies of African Freedoms*, led by Alice Bellagamba from the University of Milan “Bicocca”. Most of the authors who have contributed to this issue also participated to the workshop “Imaginaries of freedom and resonance of images. Digital technologies, subjectivities, and politics of the everyday in the online life of the African diaspora and beyond”, which we organized in June 2023 in Bologna.

and more interlinked thanks to the circulation of images in the global space (Appadurai 1996; Mazzarella 2004; Morley 2000). Moreover, digital technology and the access to internet and social media have played a crucial role in the production, circulation and reception of images globally (Matera and Biscaldi 2022; Miller et al. 2016). Anthropological research has shown how the use of new media re-produces social and cultural diversity, multiplying their uses rather than homogenizing their effects. At the same time ethnographic studies have shown the different ways images get embedded in local contexts and particular historical trajectories, while also bringing transformative power to social practices and collective imaginaries (Ginzburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002).

Starting from these premises, this special issue also attempts to undermine a simplified idea of mobility linked to global flows, of which the increased movement of people would be one of the main expressions. Its aim is rather to analyse the circulation of people and images without neglecting the power asymmetries that inform people's experiences of (im)mobility. In this sense, the question of violence and inequality has been central to our thinking. Arguing that there can be no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility, Sheller and Urry (2006) themselves have sought to analytically include both liquidity, connectivity, centrality and empowerment as well as disconnection, social exclusion and blockages in their seminal work. The main assumption is that, especially today, the world is on the move through diverse and intersecting forms of mobility that accelerate for some, while at the same time exacerbating immobility for others (Marabello and Riccio 2018; Cingolani, Lofranco, Tarabusi 2025). In other words, mobility as a resource is differentially accessed. Indeed, recent socio-anthropological work has demonstrated that, for many individuals, mobility is primarily experienced in terms of its absence, as the unavailability of opportunities for departure (Gaibazzi 2015). Immobility at home, a feeling of being stuck or the concrete inability to move (due to economic, social or political factors), may provide the initial force driving individuals to move away. For many, however, a scarcity of resources or lack of opportunity may prevent the actual move from ever taking place.

Indeed, migrants face hostile new forms of migration governance that exclude more and more people from the global circuits of legal mobility and promises of globalization. In light of this development, various migration scholars have recently argued that we need new perspectives to grasp the ways in which today's restricted border regimes curb migration and intersect with the growing migration industry and privatization of border control (Andersson 2014; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012). Going beyond a naïve equivalence between mobility and "freedom", the so-called "mobility turn" in social sciences rather stressed the social, economic and political conditions that shape and intertwine people's movements and their sedentarization, forced settlement and/or confinement (Heil et al. 2017). At the same time, enquiring into media practices through the perspective of (im)mobility helps us to question a further premise, which assumes a direct relationship between internet access, digitalization, and the democratization of the public sphere. Despite internet access having reached a global scale - blurring the lines between online and offline life, hence the concept of *onlife*

(Floridi 2015) – the distribution of “digital rights” (AbuShanab 2018) remains profoundly conditioned by social, political, and economic conditions, thereby reinforcing what Didier Fassin (2018) describes as the inequality of lives.

Thus, the concept of (im)mobility reveals to be a heuristic theoretical tool, able to highlight the power relations that constitutes *both* mobility and images. In this sense, this special issue overtly addresses the question of state and border violence, (post)colonial relations, racialization and memory construction as key research issues (Altin 2024; Ciabbarri 2020; De Genova 2013, Favell 2022; Lombardi Diop-Romeo 2012). From this perspective, critical analysis compels us to delve deeper into the processes of human differentiation and hierarchization, which unfold within uneven transnational spaces and are significantly shaped by the global economy of colonial-derived racial capitalism (Robinson 2019) and digital economy (Kassem 2023, Mezzadra et al. 2024, Srnicek 2019), as well as their contemporary intersections (Benjamin 2019, Couldry and Mejias 2019, Noble 2018). Ultimately, this issue questions visibility, (im)mobility and inequality from a temporal perspective that seeks to connect past to future: if images are, in many ways, incontrovertible outputs of history, they are also a powerful ground for political imagination and rising ideas of future (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Mullings, Sobers, Thomas 2021).

Which is the specific weight of visibility in all of this? And how is this linked to media practices and new technologies? The contributions to this issue address these questions in different ways. Beyond the variety of approaches, however, a special attention is given to the affective dimension of images, that is what they convey through – but also beyond – representation. In the history of visual studies, research has indeed focused on the content of images and the forms of representation they generate (Pennacini 2005, Poole 1997, 2005). The decolonial approach has more recently highlighted how such visual “constructions” reveal the specific positioning of the gaze, the production of otherness through the objectification of the subject of the image, and the reproduction of power relations that images can sustain (Bajorek 2020, Gill 2021, Mirzoeff 2011, Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022, Raheja 2010). The critique of representation has led to the need to deconstruct images, and integrate knowledge and history with the voice and visions of those who have been marginalized in hegemonic narratives and visibilities. Counter-representations have accompanied counter-narratives.

Starting from these reflections, this issue draws on a conception of affects as the unconscious and non-linguistic dimension (that is, non-representational) of media practices (Shouse 2005). In this sense, a particular source of inspiration has been the work of feminist visual theorist Tina Campt on the African diaspora’s photography, and her invitation to “listen to images” and grasp their “low frequencies” in the everyday (Campt 2012, 2017). Our interest in focusing on affects more than on “contents” and “meanings” has been important for many reasons. First, it has included opacity and the unspoken (cfr. Cavatorta and Pilotto 2021) as intrinsic dimensions of visual and audio-visual productions in contexts marked by violence and inequality. Second, it has given relevance to aesthetics both as normative frames but also strategies to act into the world. Third, it has allowed us to look at political action not so much in search of clear identities, formed subjectivities,

or organized movements, but rather by analysing the formation of “affective economies” (Ahmed 2004, 2014) and collective sensitivities at the intersection of embodied memory, media practices, and visibility (Pilotto 2023, 2025).

The articles are heterogeneous in the way they deal with different kinds of mobilities, images and technologies. Photography remains an important focus of research, both as an analogic technology and as a digital product. The same can be said for audio-visual contents, which appear as cinematic productions or as videos filmed by smartphones and shared through social media. Although the contemporary world of the internet and digital media is predominant in the contributions to this issue, this heterogeneity does not seem to be an analytical limitation. The study of visual productions, alongside the means through which they are created and disseminated, reminds us of the concept of affordance (Gillespie, Osseiran, Cheesman 2018, Hutchby 2001), which media studies have introduced to highlight the limitations and possibilities that different technologies open up in light of specific contexts and social practices. Moreover, this approach makes it possible to continue along the path already outlined by visual and digital anthropology, bringing together the study of the creation, circulation, and reception of images (Ginzburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002).

As a matter of fact, from a theoretical and methodological point of view, images and media are not necessarily distinct objects of inquiry, but can also overlap and intersect. In Chiara Scardozzi’s article, for example, photography becomes a mobile medium through postcards sent from Argentina to Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Printed photographs are also a means for self-representation within a public competition for young people with a migrant background in Italy (Cingolani). Furthermore, images are not only ethnographic materials – visual contents produced by others and subsequently analysed by social scientists – but also constitute ethnographic practices in themselves: visual methods and collaborative research underpin some of the films discussed in this issue (D’Onofrio, Tilche and Khanna), as well as images can constitute the main basis for the ethnographic encounter and reflections on its asymmetric reciprocity (Keita and Pilotto). Similarly, the digital realm challenges traditional methods such as participant observation: digital ethnography involves using new media – smartphones, internet platforms, and social networks – as tools to engage in ethnographic relationships in novel ways (Bachis, Manoukian, Pilotto, Santanera). The ethnographer’s online life makes it possible to study images and their movement while “staying at home”.

In this sense, the very notion of the “archive” should be reconsidered in light of new forms of visual media production and dissemination: some authors talk about “living archives” to stress the continuous collection of digital images that are generated throughout daily experience, especially in contexts of political violence (Tilche and Khanna, Pilotto). If social media and digital platforms are used in these contexts to circulate news and images in the virtual space, that very space becomes a spontaneous archive that bears witness to both violence and presence. These “living archives” – insofar as they pertain to ongoing processes of memory construction that resist erasure – are connected to the purpose of archival research, which aims to uncover traces of forgotten

or silenced presences and contribute to the rewriting of history (Jedlowski, cf. Gribaldo 2023, 2024). From postcards and films to videos and images shared on social networks, the various articles in this issue invite us to reflect not only theoretically, but also methodologically, on the extent of the transformations that has reshaped the relationship between mobility and images.

The main aspiration of this issue is to think about the mutual constituency of visibility, media practices and (im)mobility. As a matter of fact, all articles deal with images generated through experiences of (im)mobility and by people on the move. Many contributions stress the creative dimensions that are part of migrations and diasporic stories while facing border violence and boundary-making. Thanks to co-creative research through filmmaking, theatre performance and animation, Alexandra D'Onofrio shows how Egyptian migrants re-appropriate the border regime's visual framing, in which they had been entrapped since their arrival in Italy. Focusing on image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Italy, Giovanna Santanera analyses the painful and precarious relation between migrants' invisibility and hypervisibility, which nonetheless inscribes Blackness into the European history. Through archival research Alessandro Jedlowski gives historical depth to such visual traces of the African presence in Europe: the movie *A testimonianza di una condizione - 2000 eritrei a Roma* testifies to the Eritrean diaspora's marginalization in the 70s, but also to Eritrean filmmakers' cultural production in the context of the film school "Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia" in Rome.

The effort to "de-migrantize" (Dahinden 2016) mobilities is particularly evident in visual and digital research on so-called "New Italians" or "New Italian Generations" (Grimaldi and Vicini 2024). Pietro Cingolani offers a critical perspective on photographic essays produced in 2021 and 2024 as part of the *Sguardi Plurali* competition for young photographers with a migrant background. The plurality of images and gazes stresses the conflicting relation between mainstream processes of othering and representation, and self-representation as a creative process to articulate complex experiences and situated memories. In Francesco Bachis' article, this tension is analysed thanks to a digital ethnography of TikTok among "New Italians". The anthropological analysis of "What-people-think-I-do/What-I-really-do" video meme shows how intergenerational relationships and cultural expectations are reshaped in the digital sphere, questioning transnational positionalities as sites for irony and cultural critique.

Like this young people creatively and ironically inhabit transnational spaces and affects through photography, video production, and social media, Setrag Manoukian highlights the ambiguity of diasporic imageries and self-construction in the age of platform capitalism. Manoukian's analysis takes into account the videos of Nasim Aghdam, a youtuber of Iranian origin based in California who attacked employees and died at Google's headquarters in 2018. Although through different approaches (and maybe differing conclusions), both Bachis and Manoukian underline how cultural productions circulated via social media are embedded within the neoliberal economy of digital labor, which combines content creation, visibility, self-entrepreneurship, and data extraction. New forms of control are thus embedded in the supposed "freedom" granted by new technologies, encompassing both labor relations and new mechanisms of

surveillance and control within platform capitalism (see also Pilotto in this issue). Even from this perspective, the concept of human (im)mobility is intertwined with the circulation of images, insofar as digital borders shape circuits of communication and exchange value as well as processes of silencing and exclusion.

The relation between (im)mobility and images is further explored through the lens of colonialism and political violence in specific contexts, where processes of othering concern forced settlement of criminalized groups in India (Tilche and Khanna), colonial and post-colonial immigration in Argentina (Scardozi), and settler colonialism in Palestine/Israel (Pilotto). The tension between indigeneity and mobility is here a compelling line of research, which includes the contributions of indigenous studies. Chiara Scardozi's article focusses on postcards sent by European immigrants in Latin America to their families and friends in Europe. These postcards – collected as "ethnographic" images in nowadays' digitalized archives – aimed to depict native societies in Argentina between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The anthropological analysis of these postcards as an assemblage of images and words shows, on the one hand, how photography visibilised indigenous people through their exotic representation in the very moment of their physical or symbolic invisibilisation, and, on the other hand, how affective ties based on white supremacy were built through the materiality of images travelling across the Atlantic. Indigenous movies and performance are instead at the core of Alice Tilche and Akshay Khanna's reflections on the political subjectivation of India's "ex-criminal" De-Notified Tribes (DNTs). Notified as "born criminal" by the colonial British rule that forced their settlement despite their nomadic history, today these indigenous communities organize in collectives of artists and filmmakers such as the Budhan Theatre, whose cultural production aims to contest their ongoing stigmatization and marginalization. Hanging between presence and absence, the quest for visibility and the desire for opacity, Tilche and Khanna conceive indigenous art and filmed stories as "survivance" (Vizenor 2008), a way to affirm the presence and life of unruly subjects within an "intimate community". The interminglement of intimacy and violence, life and death, is also at the core of Chiara Pilotto's article on images circulating during Israel's ongoing war on Gaza and the "plausible genocide" of the Palestinian people. From the Palestinians' images of their own suffering and death, to the Israeli soldiers and influencers' trends on social media, Pilotto inquiries into the ways the Palestinian grief becomes a contested visual field in the context of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonization of Gaza and the West Bank. Once again, the circulation of photographs and videos leaves traces of Indigenous presence, as well as of its ongoing destruction.

Two key themes run through the contributions in this issue: the opacity of visibility and the sensitivity of the gaze. On the one hand, many authors highlight the seemingly paradoxical relationship between what is shown and what is hidden in the circulation of images. The implications of mobility regimes – and the related processes of stigmatization and criminalization – play a crucial role in the pursuit of opacity, even when visibility is the goal. On the other hand, the movement of images affects people differently, revealing a diversity of sensibilities and positionalities that come together and drift apart. It is here

that the issue of “sensitive content” is at stake, just as the control of images comes into play.

Between these two poles – the opacity and sensitivity of images – we can identify a relationship, or rather, multiple relationships that connect those who construct visual frames, those who mediate them, and those who are affected by them, even though these three positions may overlap. In various ways, all the contributions explore these relationships and the ways in which they are inherently unstable and potentially ambiguous. Finally, as the concluding exchange (Keita and Pilotto) of this issue shows, to explore and discuss images that have their intentionality and audience in mind not only allows anthropologists to re-think the responsibility of “giving voice” but also engage them into a terrain in which their interpretative tools have to dialogue with those of their interlocutors and the forms and modes of cultural critique they elaborate (Castellano, Riccio 2023, Riccio 2023). This is why, alongside “sensitive contents”, the anthropologists’ own sensibility is also at stake.

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articles

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

Abstract

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

Keywords

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

The author

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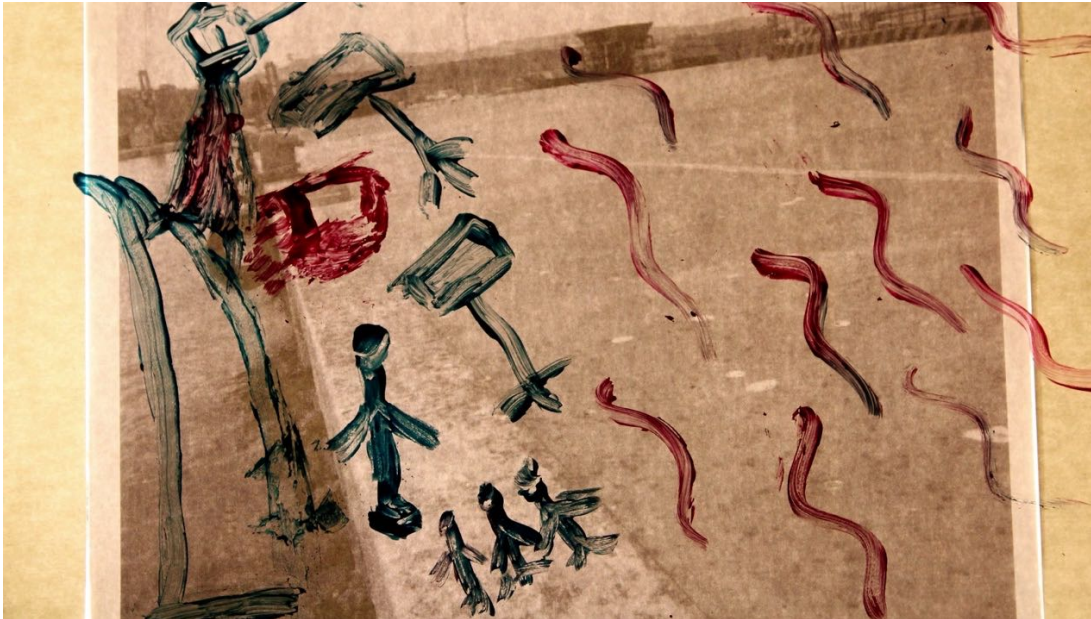


Figure 1 Mohamed's first step. Still image from animation and film *It was Tomorrow* (2018).

View **clip 1** here: <https://vimeo.com/517520808> (extract from *It was Tomorrow*)

Actually, this is where I took my first step on land in Italy. It was on this pier here, in this area. This is what I had been waiting for after forty hours at sea. [...] I only saw a passage, and all along the seafront there were journalists, photographers, video cameras recording, cameras flashing. You could see that they had been waiting for us [...].

I thought I would arrive in the desert where there is nobody. Where I can do what I want. Instead with all these people...the police arrived. I knew instantly that we would end up in the newspapers like criminals. (Mohamed in *It was Tomorrow*¹)

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

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

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

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

Meeting the border for the first time

Mohamed had left Tatum, an Egyptian rural town 113 km southwest of Cairo, on a school day in November 2004. He was 17 years old at the time. Two days later, Mohamed landed on the shores of Sicily with 204 other Egyptian young men who had crossed the Mediterranean by boat. He was one of five underage passengers on this journey, and they all came from Tatum². While walking around the harbour, Mohamed recognised a boat that looked very similar to the one that had transported him across the Mediterranean. He took photographs of the pier where he had first set foot and described to me how the moment of disembarkation was captured on many cameras and all passengers were processed by the border guards wearing masks and plastic gloves, “I knew nothing about the arrival” he said,

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

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

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

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

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

As we walked around the harbour in Agrigento, Mohamed reflected on how the medical, legal, and representational machinery awaiting him at disembarkation had been carefully staged in advance³. The overwhelming presence of guards and media – the control exhibited over their bodies and images, how they were touched, managed, and photographed – clashed with his expectation of arriving in a quiet place where he might move freely. "In the middle of the sea I made a promise to God that upon touching land I would immediately pray to thank him for sparing my life," he recalled with some regret. But rather than fulfilling that moment of intimate gratitude, Mohamed found himself carried, directed, scrutinised, measured, and disciplined. The path to social reintegration on the other shore had already been mapped by others, embedded in a series of bureaucratic steps. As he processed the scene unfolding around him, he realised that he had become part of a spectacle where he "would end up in the newspapers like criminals." His animation thus becomes a counter-image – one that listens back to the frames that tried to fix him in place. It is through such practices of co-creative image

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ Italian for disembarkation.

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

Images of the border

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

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

Researchers attempting to understand the complexity of migrants' experiences cannot avoid engaging their epistemic approach with an analysis of the way their interlocutors exist in the realm of representations (Baudrillard's *simulacra*). To challenge the clichés and stereotypes that strip people on the move of their individuality, relationships, stories, and agency, an engaged, public-facing anthropology must commit to a co-creative process of re-signification rooted in aesthetics (Mazzara 2019). This involves not simply representing "others" more accurately, but actively working with them to disrupt the dominant visual grammars that shape migration as crisis. Echoing Heidegger's call to re-endanger the language we use to describe people's worlds and experiences (2000), alternative approaches to audiovisual storytelling become necessary – not only to avoid reproducing 'othering' images, but to enable migrants themselves to question, interpret, and reshape the concepts and aesthetic categories through which they are seen. As Xavier Inda (2000⁵) reminds us, destabilising dominant narratives requires engaging with the "deconstituting potentiality" of emergent visual and narrative practices—those in which migrants' voices and perspectives become the site of a continuous re-signifying process. It is precisely this overdetermination – this foreclosure of complexity and narrative possibility – that our collaborative visual practice set out to interrupt. Rather than contribute to the circulation of spectacularised imagery, we focused on reconfiguring the visual field through ethnographic co-creation (fig.2).

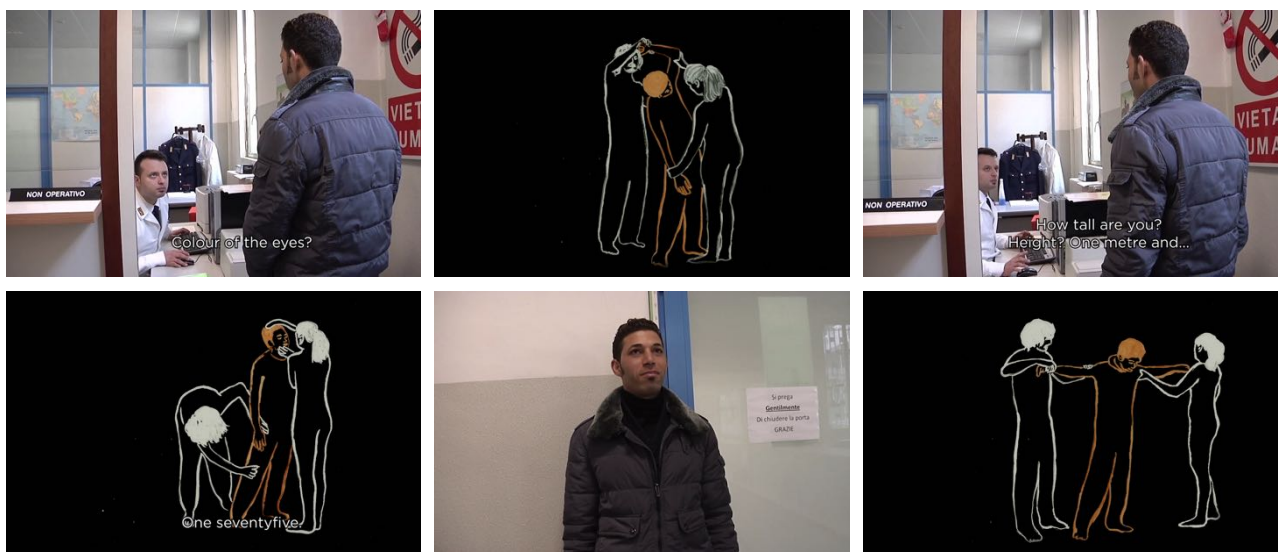


Figure 2 Meeting the border again. Composition of stills from *It was Tomorrow*
View **Clip 2** here: <https://vimeo.com/568837419> (extract from *It was Tomorrow*)

In *It was Tomorrow* (2018⁶), a film developed collaboratively with Mohamed Khamis, Mahmoud Hemida and Ali Henish during their legalisation processes, we adopted a hybrid documentary mode that brought together observational footage, photo elicitation, performance, and animation within a creative montage structure. This hybrid

⁵ in Mazzara 2019: 5

⁶ *It was Tomorrow* is distributed for educational purposes by the RAI: <https://raifilm.org.uk/films/it-was-tomorrow/>

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

(Mohamed, February 2013)

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

Listening to the quiet frequencies of images such as identification photographs of Black people and immigrants is, as Tina Campt contends, a vital "practice of looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to other affective frequencies through which photographs register," allowing us to apprehend them "by way of the unspoken relations that structure them" (2017: 8-9). These images – created primarily to meet the regulatory demands of the state or the classificatory logics of colonialism – are rarely produced out of the subject's desire. Rather, as Campt writes, "[t]hey are images required of or imposed upon them by empire, science, or the state" (ivi: 5). Precisely because these images have become so normalised – so embedded in the banal routines of state bureaucracy – we tend not to "read" them at all. Instead, we dismiss them as merely successful instances of "capturing muted governmentalised subjects of the state" (ibid). But, as Campt argues, these images are not mute. If we attune ourselves to their quiet frequencies⁷, they begin to reveal themselves as quotidian practices that register "affective" traces – offering

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

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

One way for Mohamed to unearth the thinking behind his recently produced self-portrait was to place it in relation to an earlier portrait taken for a similar purpose of institutional recognition. Separated by ten years of experiences, travel, and dreams, both identification photographs enabled Mohamed to speak about the future possibilities that lie beyond the frame – “the thought that has stayed in the head” – in terms of the state's recognition of his rights to social, existential, and physical mobility. On both occasions, he recalled how the photographer instructed him to straighten his back, look directly into the lens, and smile – confidently, but with restraint. The resulting pose, captured in each image, is at once dignified and reserved. Passport photographs of immigrant subjects are images that strive for respectability and aspiration. They are tied to dreams and the longing for possibilities, while also being inextricably bound to the tightly regulated regimes of social and geographic mobility, power, and social prejudice (Kumar 2000; Campt 2017). Realising that the discussion of his identifying self-portraits had elicited⁸ Mohamed to recover the affective qualities that had conferred to them particular meanings, I stimulated our conversation a little further:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The immigrant has a scar on his forehead at the very place his passport says that he does. For the officer this probably means that the man is not a fraud. For the immigrant the scar is a reminder of his childhood friend in the village, the one whose younger sister he married last May. Or it is likely he even doesn't notice the officer's glance. He is conscious only of a dark weariness behind his eyes because he has not slept for three days.

The officer reads the name of the new arrival's place of birth. He has never heard of it. The immigrant has spent all of the thirty-one years of his life in that village. This difference is quite ordinary. But for some reason that he does not understand, the immigrant is filled with shame (2000: 3-4).

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

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

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

how legalisation is simultaneously imagined as a breakthrough, burden, and broken promise – shaped by past traumas, enduring uncertainty, and what Ghassan Hage (2005) calls “existential mobility,” the aspiration to move toward a liveable future self. For Mohamed, legalisation brought the possibility to reimagine the future, but also intensified his ambivalence. It carried with it the scars of past “illegalisation” – what De Genova has theorised as the state’s active production of migrant ‘illegality’ as a condition to later “rectify” (2002:429). The 2012 amnesty, which finally enabled Mohamed’s legalisation, followed a failed attempt in 2009, known as the “sanatoria⁹ truffa” (fraud amnesty), in which over 400 workers in Milan, including Mohamed and Mahmoud, lost thousands of euros to scams they were powerless to report¹⁰. Going to the police station was like voluntarily entering the lion’s den. Reporting abuse as an ‘illegalised’ migrant would be like reporting themselves to the authorities. As De Genova argues, these legalising mechanisms are not designed to exclude but to include migrants under deeply asymmetrical and disciplinary terms that protract their vulnerability.

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

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

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

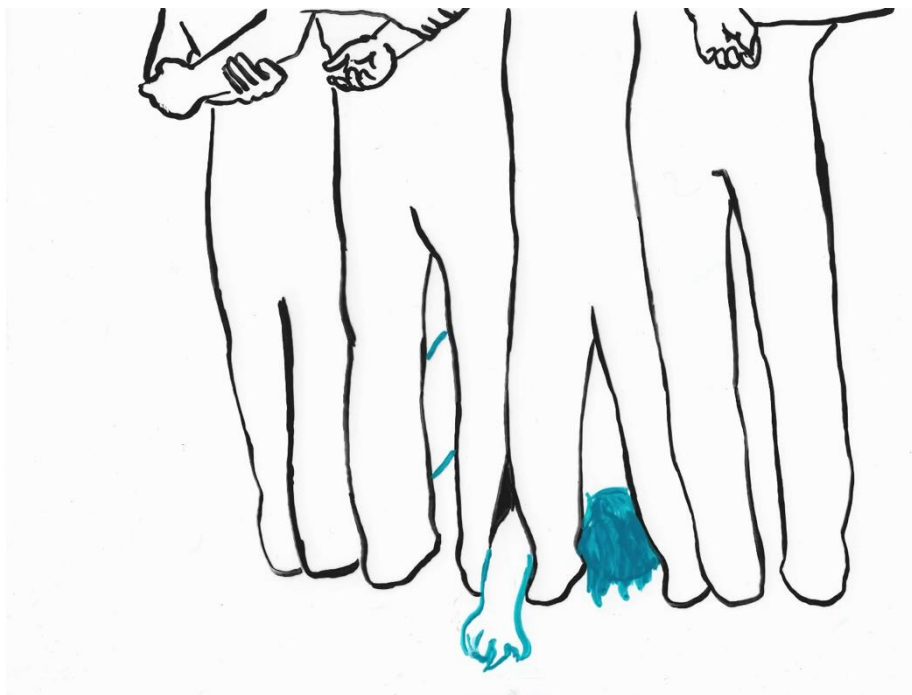


Figure 5 Narrative image n.1. Still image from animated live-action image of improvised performance, *It was Tomorrow*

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

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

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

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

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

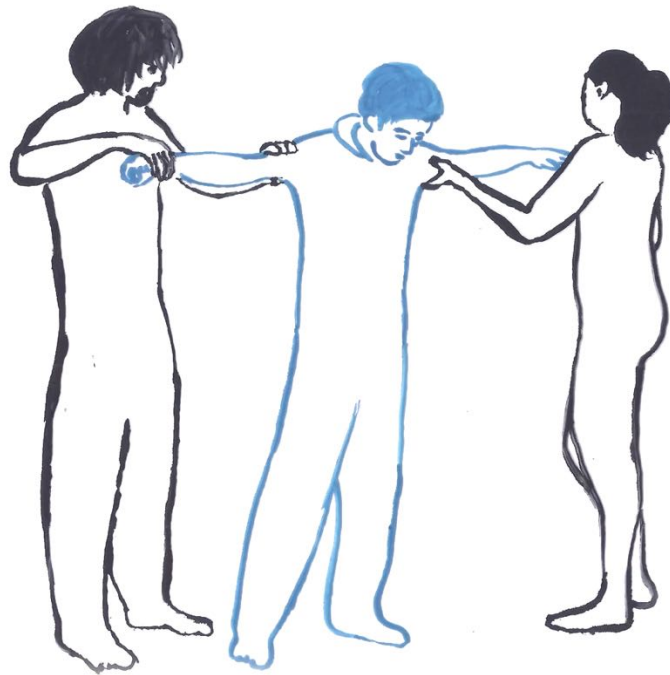


Figure 6 Narrative image n.2. Still image from animated live-action image of improvised performance, *It was Tomorrow*

At the beginning of Mohamed and Ali's legalisation process in September 2012, I invited them to join a theatre workshop co-facilitated with a friend and theatre director Anna Serlenga. Our goal was to co-create an imaginative ethnographic space that could explore how their changing circumstances reshaped their relation to past experiences and a future newly inhabited by shifting possibilities. Using physical improvisation techniques inspired by César Brie¹¹ and Augusto Boal¹², we aimed to make visible and share feelings and thoughts often inexpressible through words alone (Sjöberg 2009, 2017, 2018).

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

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

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

two actors pulled and held Mohamed's arms in opposing directions. Behind him, a chorus of actors sang an Egyptian song about the emigrant who does not return¹³. Through repetitive, measured gestures, the group embodied the physical and emotional tension of being caught at the border – neither fully present nor absent, neither free nor imprisoned (to watch the clip of the improvised making of the narrative image n.2: <https://vimeo.com/871773085>).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because of their potential to bridge experience and imagination, the personal and the collective, the embodied and the metaphorical, I chose to weave some of the 'narrative images' into the documentary through montage. Positioned at key moments, they interrupt the linear scene at the police headquarters and re-evoked the non-verbal, affective, and imaginative space generated by the physical improvisations (as seen in clip 2). For this reason, I decided to transform them into hand-drawn rotoscope¹⁴ animations, to enhance the bodily, metaphorical and ambiguous qualities of each scene and evoke Mohamed's ambivalent relationship to the state during his legalisation process. Contrasting with the photographic excess imposed by states, humanitarian agencies and media – where people crossing are hyper-visible yet reduced to bureaucratic categories – these animations enact alternative affective possibilities. They resist immediate legibility and narrative closure, preserving Mohamed's right to opacity and evoking the tension between compliance and refusal that he expressed when receiving his document and holding his identification photographs side by side.

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

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

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

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

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Images of belonging among West African men seeking asylum in Italy

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-173

Abstract

In this article I set out to analyze image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Turin, Italy, in relation to the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility, to which they are continuously subjected. Considering blackness not as a skin color but as a social construct that opposes whiteness on an inferior level, this article is about African people who are seen – “coded” – as black and their self-representation in public or semi-public spaces that are “coded” as white. After analyzing the social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment that shape the migratory experience in Italy, I will argue that these images open up an expressive space, where it is possible to articulate the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Italy, visualizing precarious forms of belonging, which are remindful of the notion of “Afropean”.

This analysis is based on ethnographic research I have been conducting since 2017 in Turin on the intersections between digital technology, social inequalities, and the application for political asylum.

Keywords

Mobile photography – Migration – Racialization – Internal boundaries – Italy

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Introduction

In this article I will consider image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Turin, Italy, in relation to the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility to which they are continuously subjected. Considering blackness not as a skin color but as a social construct that opposes whiteness on an inferior level (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Giuliani 2019), this article is about African people who are seen – “coded” (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2017) – as black and their self-representation in public or semi-public spaces that are “coded” as white¹.

The image of Italy as white stems from a process of whitening, that has its roots in the formation of the Italian state and the project of building a colonial empire. During the *Risorgimento*, intellectuals and politicians tended to identify a racial affinity between southern “uncivilized” Italians and Africans, considering Italy a *meticcio* (mixed-race) country because of its geographical location (cf. Moe 2002; Re 2003: 177; Teti 1993; Wong 2006: 47-50). A few decades later, other scientists – for example, Giovanni Marro, Lidio Cipriani and Guido Landra – instead asserted racial homogeneity as a way to promote national unity beyond fragmented regional identities, and to legitimize colonial violence. In Italian history, racism is neither solely a fascist aberration nor a recent consequence of immigration. Rather, it belongs to the fabric of the Italian state (cf. Andall and Duncan 2005; Dickie 1999; Giuliani 2015; Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 20113; Pesarini 2017; Sorgoni 2010). The construction of blackness as a marker of outsider status entails the burden of both hypervisibility and invisibility for Africans and African descendants in Italy (Giuliani 2019: 11). On the one hand, people racialized as black are deemed to be always out of place, threatening the homogeneous color of the nation through their mere presence (Giuliani 2015; Gordon 2000: 160; Puwar 2004). Their bodies are “supersaturated with meaning” (Yancy 2008a: 846), and are continually scrutinized and observed (cf. Browne 2015) by the white gaze, lest they disturb “the tranquillity of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being” (Yancy 2008b: 3). On the other hand, people racialized as black are subjected to social erasure and invisibilization. Since their presence is rarely recognized and visualized in public discourse, they disappear from the imagination of the Italian community and the official

¹ I would like to thank all those who participated in my research, and the cooperative that managed the accommodation center, where I carried out the initial part of my fieldwork. The writing of this article benefited from the comments of the participants in the workshop “Immaginari di libertà e risonanza delle immagini. Tecnologie digitali, soggettività e politiche del quotidiano nella vita online della diaspora africana e oltre”, organized by Bruno Riccio, Chiara Pilotto and the Centro Mobilità, Diversità, Inclusione sociale (MODI) of the University of Bologna, and from the debate that took place during the panel “Verso quale futuro? Etnografia, media digitali e migrazioni”, at the Fourth SIAC National Conference “Il ritorno del sociale”.

In a somewhat unusual way, I would also like to thank Andrea, who quietly slept in my arms whilst I was writing the first draft of this article, allowing his mom to work after a too short maternity leave.

This work is supported by “Cambiamenti e Potenzialità Educative e Socioculturali connessi alla Transizione Digitale” - CAPTED departmental Center, under the project Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2023-2027 underway in the “Riccardo Massa” Department of Human Sciences for Education (ID IRIS 2023-NAZ-0209). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the above-mentioned authorities, which cannot be held responsible for them.

narrative (Carter 2010: 4). This process of erasure goes hand in hand with the segregation and containment of African asylum seekers and refugees in accommodation centres, which are often located in isolated and poorly connected areas, with rules that limit the possibility of residents to leave and move freely. These restrictive measures serve the interests of the local white population, who see African migrants as a threat to security, rather than those of the people who live there (Biffi 2017: 144; Pinelli 2017: 60).

On the backdrop of these violent processes of othering and rejection, in what follows I will look at image-making in public and semi-public spaces by West African men seeking asylum in Italy, and I will reflect on what this image-making allows them to do and say about themselves. In the wake of Camp's research (2012) on family photographs among the African diaspora in Europe, I will interpret images as a record of choices rather than facts, showing how intentions, aspirations and performances are staged. My analysis will include both images posted online and images that stay (temporary) in people's phone galleries, as I am interested not only in how people would like to be seen, but also (and more generally) in how they would like to see themselves. I will argue that these images open up an expressive space, where it is possible to articulate the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Italy, visualizing precarious forms of belonging, which are remindful of the notion of "Afropean". Recalling the words of the photographer Johny Pitts:

Afropean, even if only as a provocative suggestion, tears down a dividing fence and suggest the possibility of feeling connected to two ideas – Africa and Europe [...] – without being mixed-this or half-that, Black-other or Afro-something. It is a space where Blackness has a role in shaping European identity at large, even if it isn't recognized (Pitts 2020: 243).

In evoking an Afropean sensibility, I follow Brancato, who suggests that Afropean should not be exclusively referred to so-called "second generations"², but rather connected to cultural creators that somehow express the "reciprocal embeddedness of the histories of the two neighboring continents" (Brancato 2008: 2). As a concept, I favor it over Afro-Italian (Hawthorne 2022a: 15; Kan 2020; Kuti 2019) because the forms of belonging sketched by my interlocutors are not bounded by the imagination of the nation state and bring to the forefront broader relational spaces. The notion of Afropean is not employed by my interlocutors, but is rather used by me in attempt to put in words what my interlocutors conveyed in images.

I will delve into these dynamics by focusing on some images – photographs and short videos – made by Djibril³, a young Malian man in his mid-twenties, who applied for political asylum in Turin in 2016, and whom I first met at the beginning of my fieldwork in 2017. First, I will examine the social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment that shaped Djibril's migratory experience. Then, I will discuss

² The expression "second generations" is used by the children of immigrants (for example the G2 Network. Accessed online [April 9th 2025]: <https://www.secondegenerazioni.it>), but it can also have the effect of othering people born/raised in Italy, ascribing foreign origins to them, if used with the problematic meaning of "second generation immigrants".

³ I refer to all the research participants with pseudonyms.

the meaning of the images he took that obscure the difficulties of his present day in favor of the representation of a good life. I will argue that these are aspirational images that portray the life that flows outside the places alleged by the Italian society for African migrants, breezing social and spatial confinement. Finally, I will focus on Djibril's images depicting historical monuments in Turin to reflect on the (violent and silenced) history of the relations between Italy and Africa. In conclusions, I will look at what these images conceal, but which nevertheless affects their meaning, risking to reverse it. These reflections are based on ethnographic research conducted in Turin, Italy, between 2017 and 2023, with West African men seeking asylum. In addition to qualitative interviews (in Italian, English or French) and participant observation, I also followed my interlocutors on social media, and I resorted to photo-elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986; Buckley 2014), commenting the images with their authors. My interlocutors were not very vocal about them, and what I usually collected was a list of the people and objects represented in the picture ("denotations of object more than evocations" [Buckley 2014: 720]), in a way that nevertheless gives insights into what counted to and was considered valuable by them.

Despite the enormous difficulties they were facing, Djibril and many other young West African men navigating the asylum application in Turin allowed me to get close to them, and opened up their smartphones for me. Several authors have already written about the ethical problems proper of research with asylum seekers and refugees (cf. Bouillon, Fresia and Tallio 2005: 13; Sorgoni 2022: 153-154) and smartphones (Khamisi 2022). In this vein, I would like to make some remarks to better clarify the sense and limits of the analysis that follows. Although the time spent together, and the trust that my interlocutors and I were able to slowly grant each other, the structural inequality of our relationships marked a distance, which was impossible to bridge, and which was highlighted every evening by the fact that I could leave the accommodation center and return home. As a white Italian citizen, I never experienced on my body the symbolic violence and racism that made a great part of my interlocutors' daily life, and which I will nevertheless try to report in this article. The very different understanding of the object of my research speaks about this unbridgeable distance. On the one hand, people willingly illustrated their use of the smartphone to me, as this was a "light" topic compared to the tough questions the other professionals they had to interface with daily (for example, social and legal workers, lawyers, psychologists, police) generally asked them, forcing them to retrace painful past experiences. On the other hand, the "lightness" of the topic in a moment of their lives, characterized by "heavy" problems, led in some cases to perceive my research as pointless. As Daniel, a Nigerian man (who shortly thereafter was forced to move to a remote area in the mountains, far from his wife and a newborn son, because he was absent for few days from the accommodation center, without the previous authorization of social workers), reminded me well: "why instead of using your money to do research on our cell phones, don't you use it to buy us cell phones?"⁴. In light of the extremely precarious legal condition of my interlocutors, I decided not to publish the images that I will analyze. Images were often posted and then deleted, as social media profiles were opened and

⁴ July 17, 2017.

closed by my interlocutors, according to a choreography of secret (Santanera 2024: 48), which is not disconnected from the violent habits of European police and migration officers to open smartphones to detect migratory routes and find presumed visual “evidence” of people ineligibility for refugee status (Bolhuis and van Wijk 2021; Josipovic 2024: 1832; Khamsi 2002: 267). As their image production can at any time be used against their safety and security, I decided not to publish what they consented to share with me years ago, but what may have become harmful to them in the meantime.

The images I will discuss in this article are a part of a broader scenario, characterized by the cultural production and media activism of the Afro-descendant community in Italy (cf. Bachis 2023; Hawthorne 2022a: 16-17). These are young entrepreneurs, creatives, content creators, artists and intellectuals who use videos, photographs and texts spread through blogs and social networking platforms to change the representation of the black minority in Italy, introducing their point of view into the public sphere, especially on issues that concern them. In doing so, they deconstruct many stereotypes, and contribute to proposing an idea of Italy that clashes with the image of the homogeneous white country, conveyed by the national mass media (Giuliani 2019; Ponzanesi 2005). An example of this is the artistic project “Disintegrata” by Silvia Rosi, which displays a series of photographs collected in Italy (especially in Emilia-Romagna) between 2023 and 2024, among people who arrived from Africa before 2000. These family album shots – which display the ordinariness of life – propose an idea of Italianness that stems from landscapes inhabited by black bodies⁵. The images analyzed in this article are part of this broader scenario and, albeit in a different way and from a more marginal and less visible position, contribute to the reorienting of the multifaceted experience of being black in Italy. While other visual productions by African asylum seekers openly confront racism and racialization (Pilotto 2023), these images are more oblique, addressing this violence in subtle ways, which can only be captured against the light.

Life under the (perpetual) asylum seeker label

Djibril is a young Malian, who arrived in Italy in 2016. In 2017 – when I first met him – he was waiting for his hearing at the Turin court, to which he had appealed after the rejection of his application for asylum by the Territorial Commission. At the time, he spent most of his days scrolling the social media in his bedroom in an accommodation center in the outskirts of Turin and in the park in front of the Porta Nuova train station, where in his words he “waited”⁶. Periodically, he would go to a job center in the hope of finding a job, but his short-term residence permit together with the racist dynamics that shape the labor market, made it extremely unlikely⁷. Almost every week he tried to reach the people in charge of managing the accommodation center – who rarely showed up – to find out about his court hearing, rising suspicions that they were withholding information and not

⁵ Accessed online (April 9th 2025): <https://www.collezione-maramotti.org/it/dettaglio-mostra/-/silvia-roshi-collezione-maramotti/339441>

⁶ January 5, 2018.

⁷ Migration regimes together with racial stigmatization have the effect of making African migrants vulnerable and tractable workforce, pushing them towards the black-market, while barring their access to decent and regular work (cf. Avallone, Grimaldi and Bartoli 2021).

making effort to anticipate the appointment. When the social workers told him that the judge had decided a further postponement of the hearing, in order to “unstuck” his life, he faced another dangerous journey. He crossed the border with France on foot and presented a new application for political asylum under a different identity. To this day (summer 2024) he is still struggling with the asylum system, and his time continues to be usurped by the European border regime (cf. Andersson 2014: 2; Fontanari 2017: 26; Fravega, Giudici and Boccagni 2023: 8). When he was in Turin, he often spoke to me about the “disaster”⁸ he had in his mind and – despite never losing hope, as his multiple attempts to make the “system” listen to him, to find a job and ultimately, his decision to leave Italy attest – he was forced into passivity, which he struggled to accept. To reach Italy he crossed the Sahara Desert, lived in hiding in Libya to escape racist attacks against sub-Saharan Africans, and risked his life once again by crossing the Mediterranean Sea on a boat. Once in Europe, the violence and trauma continued with his life becoming entangled in the asylum system, which he was forced to submit to, since there are almost no other ways for Africans to try to legally live in Europe (Mahmud 2024: 41).

Djibril’s suffering, anger, and extreme vulnerability – which are part of the daily life of many other asylum seekers in Italy (and beyond) – are produced by social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment. Numerous researches have documented the harshness of life in accommodation centers, where people are relegated for years, their lives being violently suspended in a sort of perpetual present (e.g. Pinelli and Ciabbari 2017). Waiting for the assessment of their application for asylum, they experience both temporal and spatial injustice (Fontanari 2017). The accommodation center where Djibril was hosted, unlike the majority of other centers in Italy, was in an area well connected to the center of Turin, and was run by social workers who were well aware of the critical aspects of the reception system, and worked hard to alleviate the socio-economic marginality of the residents. The deprivation of the social and political dimensions, the extreme narrowing of the margins of action were, however, clearly felt by my interlocutors, who lamented a life reduced to organic functions: “Eating and sleeping all day, it’s not good”, they used to point out to me⁹. While the cooperative that managed the accommodation center financed a six-month internship to all residents, they spent years at the “camp”¹⁰, where they had no choice, but to wait for time to pass, if they were unable to find other jobs (which was common, given their precarious legal status and strong discrimination). As Djibril’s life was violently suspended by the asylum system, what follows will show how suppressed futures and pasts subtly remerged in his image making practice.

Images of the happy life and the rejection of being rejected

In one of the many afternoons that we spent together in a public park in front of the Porta Nuova train station, Djibril showed me on his smartphone some images that he had taken

⁸ December 15, 2017.

⁹ Sekou, September 8, 2017.

¹⁰ The residents used to call the accommodation center “camp”.

in the previous days¹¹. They were a series of portraits of himself in an electronics store in front of some television screens, a video shot inside the same store that started from the large screens of the televisions showing the image of the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco and then snapped some of his friends inside the store together with him, a photograph that portrayed him near a black car, a selfie on the train, a series of photographs of a motorcycle snapped from different angles, a short video made in the central Piazza San Carlo of a girl who was juggling. These images of a good life – made of friends, consumption, and leisure time – do not mirror the harshness of life in the accommodation center, which Djibril often told me about, and differ significantly from those pictures that aim to provide documentary evidence of asylum seekers' daily life (Pinelli and Ciabbarri 2017). As I have already shown elsewhere (Santanera 2022: 217), these images more than documents of the present, can be interpreted as visualizations of the positive future that many young men from West Africa desire, having freed themselves from exploitative post-colonial regimes that keep them in the social, economic, and political marginality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 27; Honwana 2012: 4; Santanera 2020: 44-46). They are impregnated by a consumerist imaginary triggered by global market logics, from which Djibril was nevertheless kept on the margins, due to his precarious socio-economic condition and legal status.

Miller et al. (2016: 197) show that the desire to represent the best version of one's own life characterizes contemporary mobile photography in different societies, although what is meant by "good life" varies from context to context. To better understand the particular meaning of my interlocutors' aspirational photography, I would like to recall the image of adventure through which they thought of themselves and their future. When they talked about themselves, they rarely used the expression "migrants" (or any label taken from the asylum system), but rather defined themselves as "adventurers", "fighters" and "chasers". What it means to be on an adventure emerges clearly from the following testimonies. Adama is an Ivorian refugee, who dreamt of being able to take charge of his entire family. When I met him in the spring of 2017, he had recently obtained the refugee status, but was still unable to find a job. This greatly distressed him, as it prevented him from becoming a provider for his family network. One morning, he told me that the following week he would move to Malta. When I expressed my surprise at his sudden departure, he replied:

When you are an adventurer, when you decide something you do it immediately, without thinking. [...] Italy gave me the documents but it does not mean that my luck is here. I must go to Malta to see if my luck is there, otherwise I will go and look for it elsewhere: Spain, Ireland, Finland, Iceland... wherever I can go in Europe. Thank God now I have documents that allow me to move¹².

Demba is a young Malian, granted with a two-year residence permit for "humanitarian reasons". In 2017-2018 he was desperately looking for a job with a regular contract in order to (at least temporarily) protect himself from the risk of falling into irregular status,

¹¹ September 13, 2017.

¹² October 13, 2017.

transforming his national protection into a residence permit for work reasons. When he talked to me about his story, he said: "I didn't study in Mali, I'm not a person with great diplomas. Even many people who had studied in Mali didn't find a job: some returned to the village to cultivate the land, others became adventurers like me: they looked elsewhere"¹³. Finally, the words of Praise, a Nigerian young man, who was just eighteen years old when I first met him, communicate the exhaustion and loneliness of the adventurer, who must always be ready to leave everything and everyone to set off again: "I want to stay in Turin, I don't want to go somewhere else in Europe, unless I already have a job waiting for me. I don't want to go on an adventure anymore"¹⁴. The adventurer is a key figure in African migration. The notion of adventure does not simply indicate a risky migration, but refers to the desire to live differently and to find social and personal fulfillment – impossible at home – elsewhere. The slow, predictable and dead-end daily life that young males in West Africa are often forced to live (cf. Bellagamba 2011; Gaibazzi 2015; Santanera 2019) is contrasted by a philosophy of action and risk taking (Bredeloup 2013: 175; Zingari, Riccio, Sakho and Cissokho 2023: 42). In order to be successful, the adventure must be a phase of one's life, which ends through the accumulation of resources and material signs of success, that allow one to acquire respectability and dignity at home, through their partial redistribution. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the consumer fantasies captured in Djibril's (and in many other African asylum seekers') images visualize the adventurer's realization and the emergence of a new gendered subject, who is able to provide for himself and the needs of his community, according to proper male adulthood (Amman and Staudacher 2021: 264).

By capturing a successful future, these images visually challenge the marginal place that Italian society envisions for black migrants. They call into question internal boundaries and racialized forms of social categorization, which establish symbolic difference and produce exclusion (cf. Fassin 2010: 6; 2011: 214). Here, it is helpful to recall the notion of "black space", elaborated by Merrill (2018) in her ethnographic research in Turin. Through the concept of "black space", Merrill points at the spaces of violence, racism, micro aggressions and social erasure that characterize the existence of black migrants, refugees and African descendants in Italy¹⁵. The black space extends well beyond accommodation centers to include the daily interactions and movements of racialized subjects in public spaces; it is a "space of experience", a "body-mind-world" (Merrill 2018: pos. 2760) of black people in Italy who perceive its presence and live its boundaries on their bodies, as clearly emerges from the words of Omar, a young Gambian, who worked in the kitchen of a popular restaurant in Turin, but who shunned bars. The "strange" looks (cf. Merrill 2018: pos. 5847) – depending on the case, surprised, curious, disapproving, scared, threatening – of customers and bartenders, who police the boundaries of white spaces, reminded him that he did not belong there: "Sometimes I'd

¹³ October 3, 2017.

¹⁴ October 20, 2017.

¹⁵ Micro aggressions and everyday forms of racist violence are well documented in the works of black Italian writers and scholars. Cf. Frisina and Hawthorne (2017); Hakuzwimana (2019; 2024: 17); Pesarini and Hawthorne (2020); Scego (2018).

like to enter a bar but I'm ashamed, because I think that then the people inside the bar would look at me strangely because I'm African"¹⁶. Omar's testimony resonates with that of many other African migrants, who tend to avoid bars, cafes, and small shops, preferring the anonymity of supermarkets and large markets.

The images of success confront these boundaries, immortalizing and, through their serial repetition, normalizing a life outside the places alleged by Italian society for African migrants. By portraying themselves in those places, where white Italians would show them that they were not welcome through a myriad of micro-aggressions, my interlocutors vanished the attempts to socially erase and marginalize them, claiming their right to belong and asserting themselves as members of the polity. From this point of view, the expression "normal" that a young Gambian named Bouba used to describe these images is telling. It emphasizes that these images allow people to see themselves (and be seen, if posted) as "normal" people, rather than as racialized immigrants. As such, they are powerful assertions of one's being. The sense of belonging is elaborated aesthetically. As they represented themselves next to consumer goods, they wore fancy clothes, in tune with their surroundings, marking their membership sensorially: "These are photographs that are taken when you look beautiful, I mean, when you are well dressed, you are well-groomed. Look at this photo: everything is coordinated, hat, shirt, shoes... look at the colors! The clothes in this type of photographs are very important"¹⁷, Bakary, a young man from Gambia explained to me while he was scrolling his smartphone image gallery. The aesthetic of elegance resonates with the West African tradition of portray photography that had its golden years in the Sixties, when people flocked to the photographic studios to be pictured with luxurious costumes, props, and backdrops (Santanera 2022: 217). In his research in Gambia, Buckley (2006) connects the sensuous experience of being elegant and receiving a photograph to the joyful feeling of being cherished and wanted by the postcolonial state, envisioned as a new beautiful and modern home to join; differently, for my interlocutors in Italy the aesthetic attunement with a perceived elegant surrounding frictions with the feeling of being unwelcome.

More specifically, the representation as consumers of expensive goods clashes with the future imagined and actively designed for asylum seekers and refugees in Italy by state institutions. The recognition of school qualifications obtained abroad involves a long, complicated, and expensive procedure¹⁸, which is mostly inaccessible to those coming from countries – such as those in West Africa – where civil servants tend to produce the required documents only if paid¹⁹. As a consequence, it is very unlikely that West Africans will be able to use their school qualifications on the Italian job market, where they usually can only present their middle school diploma obtained in local adult education

¹⁶ October 20, 2017. This is a gendered racism that affects black men and women differently: men tend to be feared as dangerous and violent criminals, while women are generally reduced to sexual prey to be possessed (Giuliani 2019: 3).

¹⁷ December 15, 2017.

¹⁸ Accessed online (April 9th 2025): <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/equipollenze-equivalenza-ed-equiparazioni-tra-titoli-di-studio/titoli>

¹⁹ This is not caused by a "culture of corruption" (Jordan Smith 2008); it rather occurs because very often civil servants receive extremely low salaries, insufficient for a decent life, and are not paid regularly (cf. Ndjio 2008).

centers. Moreover, social workers tend to propose them training courses that prepare them to carry out poorly-protected, risky and low-paid jobs in line with the job market that, driven by racist dynamics, blocks their access to healthier and better-paid jobs. In this way, institutions actively plan their insertion into the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, then calling this designed economic and social marginality “integration”²⁰. Demba's words about his newly found job in a factory, where he had the task of separating the paper for recycling from the rest of the garbage, highlight the awareness of this confinement that is instead pulverized in the images: “It's the job I like! It's a little tiring but not that tiring. I like that it's a little tiring because it means that it's a job for foreigners, before I looked for work in restaurants, but these are jobs for Italians”²¹. This intersection between classism and racism typical of Italian society prevented my interlocutors from accessing the comfortable, consumer-oriented lifestyle they depicted in the images.

Images with a tourist flavor and the reframing of historical monuments

In his smartphone gallery, Djibril had also saved some photographs of Turin's monuments. In some pictures, only the monument was framed, in others Djibril was portrayed next to or climbing on top of the monument. When I asked Djibril why he had taken these shots, he replied: “as a souvenir”²². His answer suggests that these images are triggered by the journey in a foreign country long dreamt of and imagined, in a way that may remind the tourists’ “memory travel” (Urry and Larsen 2011: 155), i.e. a journey that is “not so much experienced in itself but for its future memory” (Crang 1997: 366), although embedded in completely overturned power relations and in different regimes of mobility (Glick Shiller and Salazar 2013: 190). Images of wealth and fancy lifestyles in Europe transmitted by films, television, advertisements, and social media can influence the decision of young Africans to leave (Kleist 2017: 9; Wood and King 2001: 1). The “desires for ‘transporting one’s body’ to the photographed place” (Urry and Larsen 2011: 173) recalls the longing of those tourists, who decide to leave for expensive trips dazzled by unexamined images of happiness (De Botton 2002: 9). Here, different forms of mobility intersect (cf. Riccio 2019: 7; Williams 2019: 71-73), suggesting the opportunity to go beyond the frame of migration and its categories to grasp the multiple facets of Djibril’s experience in Europe.

Furthermore, the “abundance” (Edwards 2015: 237) of these photographs – i.e. what they include beyond their creator’s control and immediate intention – let other latent stories to surface. The images of monuments evoke the history and values petrified in monuments. Monuments are political signs that mark the public space of the city and inscribe the current order in it. The more powerful, the more invisible to the gaze, they seem inert parts of the urban landscape, which thus remains unquestioned. Through their silent presence, they re-actualize the values they symbolize; they fix a certain version of history, erasing alternatives (Bargna 2020; Pesarini and Panico 2021). Turin is the city with the highest number of monuments of Italy (Sincero 1992: 26). The majority of them were

²⁰ Sorgoni (2010: 122) underlines the colonial legacy of this training in subordinate roles.

²¹ December 8, 2017.

²² September 13, 2017.

built in the nineteenth century, following the European “statuomanie” of the time (Agulhon 1978). In general terms, they celebrate the history of the Savoy dynasty and the heroes and soldiers of the *Risorgimento*, which resulted in the unification of Italy (Sincero 1992: 36-37). To give just a few examples, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century statues were erected of Amedeo Duca D'Aosta, Carlo Alberto, Vittorio Emanuele I, Vittorio Emanuele II, Garibaldi, Mazzini and Gioberti, together with monuments celebrating soldiers, such as the *Alfiere* sent as a gift by Milan to commemorate Piedmont's and Lombardy's unity of purpose against Austria and placed in the central Piazza Castello in 1859²³.

Among the histories silenced by the official narrative, celebrated in monuments, there is the record of the (violent and unequal) relations between the kingdom of Sardinia and the African continent. Princes and kings of the House of Savoy, as well as other Savoy citizens, made voyages of exploration and wove diplomatic and commercial relations with the political and economic elites of the African continent (De Filippis, Pagella and Pennacini 2023a: 12; cf. also Pennacini 1999). Material traces of these long-standing relations are the collections – significantly “forgotten” (De Filippis, Pagella and Pennacini 2023b) – of African artefacts in Piedmont (for example, at the Royal Armory and at the Castle of Racconigi), which were donated in the context of diplomatic relations altered by colonial aims, were the result of raids, or were purchased during commercial expeditions. The presence of African people in Piedmont in the nineteenth century is equally silenced. It can be comprehended mainly, but not only, within the process of building a unitary national (and racial) identity (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Giuliani 2019). Vittorio Emanuele II was given two child slaves – sadly known as “Akka del Miani”, Thiebaut and Kerallà, purchased in the current Democratic Republic of Congo –, who became the object of racist anthropometric studies by the circle of intellectuals that revolved around Paolo Mantegazza, Arturo Zannetti, Enrico H. Giglioli and Pellegrino Matteucci. In 1884 the first of a series of human exhibitions was set up in the Valentino Park, during the Italian General Exhibition, two years after the establishment of the Bay of Assab as a royal colony. Three men, a woman and two children from Assab were forced to live in a small village made of four huts, together with some animals. Their spectacularized presence had the aim of representing blackness as an extreme (primitive) otherness, against which to shape the imagination of a white (modern) Italian community, capable of leveling regional divisions and promoting the integration of the newborn nation into Europe. It also wanted to be an incentive to support the emerging colonial project, inviting spectators to observe the staging of the supposed Africa's “inferiority”. The Abyssinians, however, were far from being mere objects of observation, but actively interacted with the public and the organizers of the exhibition, quickly proving capable of renegotiating their presence in Italy (Accornero 1999: 77; Abbattista 2021: 122). This African presence during the *Risorgimento* is a part of a broader picture, that sees Italy within a dense network that over the centuries has shaped what has been called the Black Mediterranean (cf. Proglia et al. 2021; Grimaldi 2019; Hawthorne 2022a, b). As the film *We were here. The untold story of*

²³ Cf. the list of all the monuments that celebrate the history of the *Risorgimento* in Turin in Sincero (1992).

Black Africans in Renaissance Europe by Fred Kudjo Kuwornu (2024) recalls, in the Renaissance, ambassadors, servants, soldiers, pilgrims, interpreters, catechumens and students of seminaries and religious colleges from sub-Saharan Africa were living in Italy, particularly in Turin, Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples²⁴, while Italian traders played a role in the trade networks of enslaved Africans in the Mediterranean that paved the way for the transatlantic trade (Lowe 2013).

This process of invisibilization (Carter 2010: 4) of the relational space that has linked Africa to Italy over the centuries, in favor of the representation of discrete units, has the consequence of othering Afro-descendant people and placing them outside the boundaries of Italianness. It hides the fact that Africans have been part of the European world for centuries, and that the history of Africa and Europe (and Italy) are enmeshed (Coronil 1996: 73; Hawthorne 2022a, b; Merrill 2017: ch. 1). With disturbing lines of continuity with the past, present-day Italian mass-media continues to other people of African origin, by displaying the image of a homogenous white country, where they are new comers, in precarious living conditions. This representation is particularly pervasive, because it is transversal to different means of communication: it is not only on television and in newspapers, but also in cinema, where black Italian actors are generally required to play foreign characters, who speak a broken Italian and live on the margins of society, such as the newly-arrived refugee, the drug dealer or the prostitute (cf. Campani 2001; Danewid 2017; De Franceschi 2013)²⁵. The documentary *Blaxploitalian. 100 years of Blackness in Italian cinema* (2016), by Fred Kudjo Kuwornu, denounces precisely this limited and limiting representation, which contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes, with the effect of aggravating the alienation of the black minority from the national community.

When read on the backdrop of this complex scenario, to a certain extent Djibril's photographs of Turin historical monuments assume another layer of meaning, beyond the touristic flavor. The presence of Djibril's racialized body on the monuments evokes (the violent) history of relations between Italy/Europe and Africa, which is usually silenced. By visualizing the missing part, it challenges the invisibilization of the Euro-African relational space and of Afro-descendant people in Italy, who can only be represented as radical outsiders as long as the official narrative continues to deny how the history of Africa and Europe are interweaved. Djibril's images mark a presence that seems to say "we are here (in Italy)" but also "we have always been here", giving historical depth to contemporary migration paths and challenging the narrative according to which the arrival of people from Africa in Italy dates back to the 1970s. Bringing blackness back

²⁴ The presence of people of African origin (mainly servants) is partly documented in Italian Renaissance paintings.

²⁵ Some exceptions are noteworthy. Among the most recent examples, the *Summertime* series directed by Lorenzo Sportiello and Francesco Lagi and distributed by Netflix in 2020. The protagonist, a teenager from the Romagna Riviera, struggling with classic adolescent problems, is played by the Italian-Nigerian actress Coco Rebecca Edogamhe (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: <http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/vi-facciamo-conoscere-coco-rebecca-edogamhe-la-giovane-stella-di-summertime-su-netflix/>). The Rai fiction *E' arrivata la felicità*, directed by Riccardo Milani and Francesco Vicario and broadcast on Rai Uno from 2015 to 2018, is one of the first attempts by public television to propose Afro-descendant actors in non-stereotypical roles. Here, the Italian-Ethiopian actress Tezeta Abraham plays the role of a working student unlucky in love (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: <http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/ciak-si-gira-afroitaliani-sul-grande-e-sul-piccolo-schermo/>).

within national borders frictions with the attribution of citizenship by descent (following the right of blood), according to a law²⁶ that tends to relegate black people – even those with descendants who have been in Italy for several generations – to the position of outsiders, through the fatal coupling of race and citizenship (Hawthorne 2022a: 5; Tuckett 2024: 50).

Conclusions

In this article I have analyzed Djibril's image-making in public and semi-public spaces in connection with the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility, to which African people seeking asylum in Turin are being continuously subjected. I have argued that these images open an expressive space, where it is possible to visualize the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Turin. To a certain extent, they sketch precarious forms of belonging that recall the notion of "Afropean", as they evoke the intertwined history of the two continents.

After analyzing what these images reveal, I would like to conclude by reflecting on what they conceal. In her work on family photographs among the African diaspora in Europe, Camp (2012) understands photographs as records of choices between alternatives, rather than as documents of facts. It is only by considering the selection between possible alternatives that it is possible to reconstruct the multiple meanings of images. According to this perspective, the discarded options – what does not become a photograph – are meaningful. Barber (1987: 8), in her analysis of African popular art, argues that silences, loopholes and fissures are important because they highlight the doubts and anxieties of cultural creators, opening the possibilities of alternative views. Barber's concept of silence emphasizes that the unsaid does not disappear, but hovers in the air, fueling the chance of reversal meanings. This is how black spaces, silenced in the image-making practices analyzed in this article, do not disappear but reappear through the gaze and bodily reactions of some observers.

African asylum seekers' images of a happy life – which, when posted on social media, generally receive compliments by followers – are often verbally ridiculed by social workers. During my fieldwork, social workers repeatedly brought my attention to these images that they found on residents' social media, mocking them more or less subtly. This reaction demonstrates that these images are haunting for the receiving white society. They are never interpreted as documents that attest to a presence by social workers, who relate to them as they were sort of jokes. Like "the look" of the bartenders and the shopkeepers, the disbelief and derision communicate an attributed non-belonging.

²⁶ These photographs can be linked to other operations aimed at bringing submerged memories to the surface, through the re-reading of some spaces of the city. For example, the "Valentino decoloniale" Walking Lab, promoted by the non-profit organization Renken, has the goal to reveal the almost unknown history of the human exhibitions that were organized in the spaces of the Valentino park (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: <https://www.renken.it/4724-2/>). Another attempt to call into question the version of history petrified and reactualized by monuments is the artistic project "Memory Matters", which, again at Valentino Park, in 2021 proposed a reflection on collective memory in public space, through four commissioned artistic interventions to the artists Leone Contini, Alessandra Ferrini, Muna Mussie and Adjie Dieye in collaboration with Silvia Rosi, who addressed the theme of monumentality and permanence and developed an investigation into the Italian colonial past, in search of its hidden traces (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: <https://fsrr.org/mostre/memory-matters/>).

Making fun of these images is a way to disempower them, bringing the subjects represented back into the spaces and categories imagined for them by the receiving society. The laughter of incredulity seems to say that African asylum seekers cannot in any way have desires and aspirations, other than the basic needs, and that a future of belonging for them cannot even be fantasized. On the contrary, their serial repetition represents the stubborn reaffirmation of the right to belong (i.e. of being visible, instead of hypervisualized/invisibilized), no matter how hard the white gaze continuously tries to confine and erase the presence of black people. This is what these images put at stake, while the discomfort (expressed through the laughter) they provoke to the whitened Italian society speaks volumes about the racist dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which lay at the core of the social fabric.

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African memories of Europe: visual traces of Eritrean presences in 1970s Rome

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-174

Abstract

This essay explores the visual traces of Eritrean presence in 1970s Rome, focusing on the documentary film *A testimonianza di una condizione - 2000 eritrei a Roma*. The film, produced by Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed, Paolo Rossato, and Johannes Yemane, is one of the earliest visual documents portraying an African migrant community in Italy. It highlights the experiences of Eritrean migrants, particularly women, who faced exploitation and marginalization while striving for better futures through education and political activism. The film underscores the importance of the 1970s as a foundational period for African migration to Italy, challenging the common narrative that significant African migration began in the 1990s. It also emphasizes the role of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in organizing and empowering the Eritrean diaspora in Rome in that period. By examining this film, the essay aims to reframe Italian collective memory and identity, incorporating African perspectives and experiences. This approach not only enriches the understanding of Italy's social and cultural history but also calls for further research into the visual archives of non-European filmmakers who documented their experiences in Italy.

Keywords

Migration, Europe, Africa, Eritreans in Italy, visual archives

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Introduction

Memory plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities. As European societies become increasingly multicultural, it becomes pivotal to question the ways in which they remember and interpret their pasts in order to better understand how they can construct alternative visions of their identity and their future. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1950), collective memory is not merely a repository of the past but a dynamic process that shapes how communities understand themselves and their place in the world. Memory studies equally emphasize the necessity of including multiple narratives in the construction of identity. As Barbara Misztal (2003) argues, in fact, the inclusion of diverse memories can enrich the collective identity, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the past and the present.

Memory, however, can play a double role in processes of collective identity-making: it is “key to claims of recognition and empowerment on the part of subjects and groups in marginalized positions [but] it is also part of power/knowledge regimes that define forms of selective inclusion and exclusion” (Lähdesmäki et al. 2019: 5). Indeed, in an era in which overtly racist and xenophobic political parties are gaining significant traction in European politics the call for opening up European memories and identities to their historical complexity and multiplicity have become less and less audible. Monolithic accounts of national identity prevail over more nuanced perspectives that take into consideration the long-term processes of mutual interaction, hybridization and crosspollination that occurred as a result of the role that Europe played in the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the contemporary acceleration of migration flows. In this context, the researcher is left with the arduous task of finding new strategies to enter the debate and unsettle the Eurocentric perspectives on which it is grounded. According to comparative literature scholar Andreas Huyssen, one way to respond to the progressive incarceration of European memories and identities into the boundaries of “Fortress Europe” is to acknowledge and investigate the way in which Europe has been imagined, remembered and represented by others. As he suggests,

At a time when the boundaries of European citizenship are challenged from both the inside and the outside, those boundaries cannot be equated with the imaginary boundaries of European memory. The rights to citizenship are usually defined administratively and politically. European memory cannot be. It cannot be culturally fortified. For what is European memory if it does not include memories of Europe’s role in the world at large? It must reciprocally acknowledge the memories of Europe as they circulate elsewhere, and now even inside Europe itself (2019: 1).

Such perspective allows us to look at Europe from without, decentralizing Europe’s memories of itself and opening them up to a dialogic process that can recognize the constitutive role that ideas about, and experiences of, Europe by non-Europeans have played in making Europe what it is today.

In this essay I take up Huyssen’s suggestion and, following the conceptual attempts of building a “pluriperspective concept of Europe” (Abdelmadjid 2018: 152; see also Goddard 2024) developed by several scholars over the past few years, I discuss the

existing visual traces of African (and more precisely Eritrean) memories of 1970s Italy as they are represented in one of the earliest visual documents about an African community's experience of life in the Peninsula, the documentary film *A testimonianza di una condizione - 2000 eritrei a Roma* made in 1977 by Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed, Paolo Rossato and Johannes Yemane. To the best of my knowledge, this is one of the very first films that deeply and extensively portrays an African migrant community residing in Italy, and one of the first to see an African filmmaker based in Italy, Johannes Yemane, play an active role in the production process. As such, this film allows us to interrogate existing chronologies and memories about African migration to Italy so as to reframe them on a longer-term and rather Afrocentric perspective. In fact, while most existing accounts consider the 1990s as the key turning point in the history that made Italy a major receiving country for African outward mobilities (De Cesaris and Impagliazzo 2020; Di Sanzo 2023), the film shows the importance of the 1970s as a funding decade for the analysis of both African migration fluxes to Italy and the African experience of Italy more generally. On the other hand, the role played by an Eritrean filmmaker in the making of the film offers an important counterpoint to existing debates about the visual representation of migration in Italian cinema, which is dominated by the analysis of films about migration made by Italian filmmakers and only rarely and marginally refers to representations of the African experience of Italy made by African or Afro-descendant filmmakers.

The analysis of this film, its portrayal of the Eritrean experience of Italy in the 1970s and its contribution to opening up our understanding of Italy's collective memory of migration and colonialism constitutes the core of this essay. But this discussion is preceded by two short sections that offers a few theoretical and empirical elements to better frame the argument developed in relation to the film. In the first section, I present a theoretical reflection on the interest of analysing African memories of Europe to transform and enlarge the existing debates about migration, diaspora and collective identity in the continent. In the second, I discuss the role that the film school "Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia" in Rome – the school that the five filmmakers of *A testimonianza di una condizione* attended together at the time the film was produced – can play in offering an archive for the study of non-European memories of Italy thanks to its particular connection, throughout the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, to what was called, back then, the "Third World". In this sense, beyond presenting some specific research results, this essay is also a call for further research into what could constitute an important archive of visual images about Italy made by non-Italian and non-western filmmakers in relation to a period of Italian history that is rarely discussed through the prism of visual representations other than those produced and circulated by Italian and western filmmakers¹.

¹ Drawing on Abdelmadjid's work (2018: 158) and his extended definition of "Europe", I use here the term "West" to define the group of countries that have been involved in modern colonialism, and more precisely those that actively participated in the Berlin Conference in 1884: United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Austro-Hungary, Denmark, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden-Norway, and the Ottoman Empire.

The multiplicity of African memories of Europe and the limits of the existing visual archives about the African experience of Italy

Over the past couple of decades, a significant number of researches have emerged which analyse the way in which, while Europe was busy exploring the African continent and deploying its military and commercial power to exploit its resources and people, African people equally explored Europe and made the West the object of curiosity and ethnographic interpretation, and at times their home (Northrup 2009; Otele 2021). Several members of the African commercial and intellectual elites travelled to Europe since the fifteenth century, for instance, producing travel diaries and memories of their experience that help us complicate our understanding of both European modernity and African subjectivity in interesting ways (Adi 1997; Ochonu 2022). As Moses Ochonu highlights in his fascinating analysis of Northern Nigerian Emirs' travel accounts of their trips to Britain in the early twentieth century (written in Hausa language), the African traveller-ethnographer imagination that can be read in these accounts "lays claim to knowledge production through experiencing and observing the ways of the white man in the same way European actors established an epistemological genre on colonized societies through instrumentality of observation, travel, and claims of experiential recall" (Ochonu 2022: 7). These writings help us gaining an alternative understanding of the way African people looked at, and understood Europe during colonialism, through a mixture of rejection and admiration. They also make it possible to reshuffle the European conceptualization of modernity so as to understand modernity "relationally" (Geschiere, Meyer and Pels 2008), not as the exclusive result and prerogative of western actors, but as the outcome of the long-term, unbalanced but certainly not univocal or homogenous relationship between Europe and its numerous "others", including Africa.

Research on the experience of African people living in Europe shows the importance of these materials in complexifying our understanding of processes of collective and individual identity-making in the colonial metropolises (Otele 2021). In her brilliant analysis of Afro-European family photographs collected in Germany and Great Britain, feminist and visual studies scholar Tina Campt highlights the importance of visual archives of European Blackness:

as objects that place people both historically and socially, through the ways they articulate a profound aspiration to forms of national and cultural belonging, inclusion, and social status. These photos [and other visual materials] document such articulations not only through the factual evidence they record, but, more provocatively, through the ways they stage intentions, aspirations, and performances of European subjects in formation, and capture important moments of enunciation (2012: 8-9).

Campt's research shows how the analysis of the African experience of Europe can help us unsettle normative, monolithic and mono-racial understandings of the European identity so as to include the way in which alternative, multiple and polycultural identities have acted to make themselves visible, progressively building what Shelleen Greene (2021) calls "an archive of Black futurity". The visual traces of the African experience of

Europe that interest us here constitute “radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness” (Camp 2021: 17) and open up the possibility to “create another trajectory for our present moment and our possible future” (Greene 2021: 32), beyond the narrow path designed by xenophobic and essentialist readings of European history and present identity.

In relation to these debates, the research presented here insists on an archive that is yet relatively under-researched, the archive of moving images about early African presences in Italy. If a growing body of scholarship have analysed the way in which Italian cinema discusses African migration to Italy and the representation of blackness on Italian screens (Greene 2012; O’Healy 2019), still relatively limited is the scope of the works that focus on moving images produced by Afro-Italian filmmakers or which portray Italy and the Italian society from the point of view African or afro-descendant subjects (Jedlowski 2011; Jedlowski 2012; Frisina and Muresu 2018). Within this framework, if the existing works highlight the long-term presence of Black actors in Italian cinema (De Franceschi 2013), they acknowledge the lack of significant and effective policies to support the production of visual representations of visible minorities by members of these same minorities. New forms of visual media production and dissemination (such as smart phones and social media) offer new archives to investigate the African experiences and memories of today’s Italy (Santanera 2019), but harder is the task that faces the researcher who wishes to investigate the visual traces of the historical presence of African and afro-descendant people in the country. It is in this context that the historical experience of the Rome-based film school Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia can be of particular interest.

African film students, school films and Rome’s Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in the 1960s and 1970s

As scholars of African cinemas have learned thanks to a number of, mostly recent, researches, several young Africans studied cinema in European film schools in the years that preceded and followed independence. If the case of students who attended French and Russian film schools is probably the best known (cf. Woll 2004; Chomentowski 2021), important experiences happened also in other European countries such as Poland (Pierre-Bouthier 2023), Czechoslovakia (Stejskalová 2017) and, in what interest us more closely, Italy (Laviosa et al. 2021; Coletti 2024). These students, similarly to those who came to Europe to study other disciplines, experienced life, love and political activism, but also racism, poverty and discrimination in Europe, and left several traces of their experiences through various kinds of private or public forms of cultural production. Film students are particularly interesting in this sense, as in most cases they had to produce short or feature films for their final exams, and since they did not have much funding at their disposal, they often turned their eyes on the hosting society and produced visual accounts of their living experience in Europe. Except for a few notable cases, these films have been seldomly studied until today, but they offer a very interesting visual archive to investigate the African memories of Europe produced throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Think

for instance at the fascinating portrayal of African people in 1990s Russia in the short film *October* (1993), shot by Malian/Mauritanian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako during his years at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, or at the harsh denunciation of French attitudes towards African immigrants in the film *Nationalité: Immigré* (1975) – a film that the Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona began to shoot while he was a student at the École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière in Paris.

Within this context, Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) occupies a particularly interesting as much as understudied position. As Flavia Laviosa, Alfredo Baldi, Jim Carter and Diego Bonelli underscore, the CSC “has included a relevant number of diverse populations: about 500 international students from six continents (Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Latin America and North America), and approximately 100 countries since its opening in 1935” (2021: 175-176). Among them, most students from Southern regions, and particularly from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, attended the school in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, as a result of “the fascination of world artists with Italian neorealism and for the high reputation of the filmmakers who taught at the CSC, including Luigi Chiarini, Pietro Germi, Alessandro Blasetti and Luigi Zampa” (*ibid*: 178; see also Baldi 2020; Laviosa 2021). If the experience of the Latin American students is particularly well known, as among them were some of the key figures of Latin American cinema and culture of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Julio Garcia Espinosa, Fernando Birri, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (who did not complete the degree) and others (Francese 2009), less known is the history of the African students who attended the school. Among them was Johannes Yemane, the Eritrean filmmaker who contributed to the production of *A testimonianza di una condizione* together with four of his fellow CSC students. Yemane graduated in 1978 and later went back to Eritrea to join the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and fight for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, but while he was in Rome he engaged in the artistic and political activism that characterised the students' life in the Italian capital at the time.

As Maria Coletti (2024) underscores, Yemane enrolled at the Centro Sperimentale when he was 28. An already experienced and well-travelled young man, holding a degree in sociology from the University of Rome La Sapienza, he had a scholarship from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct historical research about Eritrea, and wished to study cinema because, as he wrote in his application letter to the CSC, “cinema in Eritrea is in its infancy, or even at an embryonic stage. There are no filmmakers, no local productions to mention, so it is necessary for my land to have one of her sons studying this means of communication” (Yemane quoted in Coletti 2024: 75). As student, he was part of a relatively international cohort, with 9 foreigners (including two other Africans, Mathilda Dixon from Nigeria and Jean Akighe Mba from Gabon) and 31 Italians, who were living “in a post-68 environment, an internationalist spirit [...] – as Ali Reza Movahed explained in interviews –. We were a well-integrated group and we often organized political gatherings. We enjoyed ourselves together a lot” (Reza Movahed quoted in Coletti 2024, 76).

To better understand the politics at play in the production of a film like *A testimonianza di una condizione*, it is not enough to mention the simple coincidence of Yemane studying

together with four other aspiring filmmakers of various origins (Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed and Paolo Rossato) and collaborating for the production of a short film, for their first year examination. Rather, it is important to underline how, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of intense intellectual and political interest by Italian artists (and particularly filmmakers) for African liberation struggles and, more generally, Third World politics and non-Aligned solidarities (Caminati 2022; Mestman 2021). As Luca Caminati underscores,

While the political and cultural impact of the third-world liberation movements has been largely erased from the Italian cultural landscape – in a way mirroring the erasure of Italy’s own colonial past – popular images of *terzomondismo* (third worldism) are omnipresent in the visual landscape of the time. [Within this context, it is possible to imagine 1960s and 1970s Italian cinema] as part of a much larger system of global radical geopolitical engagement. [...] the act of situating it within this wider sphere emphasizes how much it was influenced by, and responded to, the theoretical and artistic developments outside of Europe, from Algerian post-revolutionary cinema to the Latin American formulations of Third Cinema (2022: 140, 143).

Traces of this dense landscape of political solidarities and aesthetic collaborations are visible in the “Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico - AAMOD” (Audio-visual Archive of the Workers and Democratic movements), based in Rome, the place where I first had the opportunity to encounter *A testimonianza di una condizione* (Jedlowski forthcoming). Originally created to keep the audio-visual archives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), AAMOD progressively became “one of the essential audio-visual archives for the history of Italian and international militant cinema” (Folens and Lancialonga 2021: 131), as it includes thousands of hours of footages and edited materials relating to political struggles and experimental activist filmmaking from all over the world. Despite being freely accessible on AAMOD YouTube channel², *A testimonianza di una condizione* received very little scholarly attention to date, and to my knowledge, it was only presented publicly once in recent years, during a retrospective on Italian colonialism organized by the Casa internazionale delle donne in Rome, in collaboration with AAMOD, the Istituto Luce and the Griot Bookshop (cf. Coletti 2024). The following sections of this essay try to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the film so as to highlight its contribution for the understanding of the role that African memories of Europe can play in reconfiguring European collective identities.

A unique document: *A testimonianza di una condizione* - 2000 eritrei a Roma

The black and white short film *A testimonianza di una condizione* - 2000 eritrei a Roma opens with a long travelling shot of Via Giovanni Giolitti, the narrow road that longs Rome’s main train station, Termini, and its imposing Fascist architecture. The camera moves down the road and drives the viewer to Piazza dei Cinquecento, the large square

² The film can be watched at the following link: <http://patrimonio.aamod.it/aamod-web/film/detail/IL8700001916/22/a-testimonianza-condizione.html?startPage=0&idFondo=>

that sits in front of the train station and hosts a busy bus terminal. Buses come and leave full of passengers, dispatching them to the different neighbourhoods of the city, and a few African men profit from the bustling atmosphere to sell commodities on a few informal stalls. The square's name is heavily connected to the Italian colonial past (the *Cinquecento* are the more than five hundred Italian soldiers who died in the battle of Dogali in 1887, one of the largest defeats ever experienced by a colonial army during the European expansion in Africa) and in front of the camera we see unfolding the consequences of colonial past on the Italian society. The camera moves around the square and captures the fugitive image of a few African women, wearing light white veils on their heads, many of them running away from the camera objective: we recognize their traditional East African garments before one of them explicitly introduces herself as an Eritrean woman.

The first who speaks in the film, whose face we do not see, clearly sets the tone for what will follow: "noi qui all'estero, in Italia, ci troviamo molto male, davvero molto male. [...] Bene o male riusciamo a trovare un posto [di lavoro] ma è il posto a cui hanno rinunciato non solo le donne italiane ma tutti gli altri stranieri, in posti proprio orribili, con famiglie proprio pestifere"³. The woman that we meet just after is younger, she presents herself and tells us that she has arrived in Italy in 1973 together with an Italian family, to study and work as house help. She explains that, once in Italy, the family forbade her to go to university and obliged her instead to focus only on domestic work. She recalls how she escaped from this family only to end up working in another one which equally made it impossible for her to study. She finally landed, more than three years after arriving in Italy, in a family that allowed her to do what she had originally come to Italy for (going to university) on the side of her domestic job. The tone of the interviewee's voice is far from scared and intimidated by the camera. She is firm, her voice does not betray any uncertainty. Filmic choices by the authors are significant here: the zoom on her face demonstrates her strength as she lists the tasks required of her in the house where she worked as a maid; the shot of her fierce profile confirms her political awareness.

These first two encounters introduce the main topic of the film: the exploitation of Eritrean migrants, and particularly women, by Italian families, and their active rebellion and search for a better future. Contrary to a film like Sembene Ousmane's classic *La Noire de...* (1966), in which the protagonist, the young Senegalese woman Diouana (interpreted by Mbissine Thérèse Diop), is exploited by her hosting family in France and commits suicide as a result of the suffering and discrimination that she experiences after coming to Europe, here we are clearly presented, from the beginning of the film, with a different situation. The migrant women the film focuses on are politically conscious and willing to fight. They are often filmed from below, as to pay a tribute to their autonomy and strength. After introducing herself, for instance, the young woman at the beginning of the film describes her intense daily life, shared between the long hours spent working for her host family and the almost clandestine time (early in the morning and throughout

³ Translation: "Here, abroad, in Italy, find ourselves in a very bad, really very bad situation [...] For better or worse we manage to find a job, but it is the place that not only Italian women but all the other foreigners have given up on, in truly horrible places, with truly pestiferous families".

the night) invested in studying to earn a better future. She explains that, while she has good interactions with other Italian students, her favourite time of the week is when she meets her fellow Eritreans, every Thursdays and Sundays.

Following this biographical account, the documentary enters a particularly interesting sequence, which introduces the viewer to the political world of the Eritrean community based in Rome. As the young woman explains, during the community meetings, those who can read and write attend courses in political education, and the analphabets are taught how to read and write. We thus follow a group of Eritrean women as they cross Rome on a public bus and land in a peripheral neighbourhood to participate to one of the Sunday community meetings, which takes place in what appears to be a sort of circus tent. At this point the voice-over of an Eritrean man explains in Italian that the Eritrean community gathers in places like this

per discutere della linea politica del fronte popolare [l'EPLF] e anche per riscoprire la nostra cultura originaria e per mantenere vive le nostre tradizioni culturali. Questi momenti comuni per noi rappresentano una risposta all'emarginazione che siamo costretti a subire nelle grandi città europee⁴.

The camera then spend a few minutes wondering around the large theatre, crowded by a mostly Eritrean and African audience, overwhelmingly made of women, and showing us scenes of music and dance performances as well as inaudible political speeches by an Eritrean man dressed with military attires. A few billboards in Italian are visible, such as one that signals that we are witnessing a gathering devoted to a special cause: it is the 30th of April and the community is celebrating the martyrs of the Eritrean secessionist rebellion against Ethiopia. The fact that the billboard is in Italian, as well as the fact that all protagonists in the film speak in Italian rather than Tigrinya signal EPLF's efforts to gather international support for its cause by targeting non-Eritrean audiences (cf. Cohen 2023). Beyond these details, it is important to underline the strength of this sequence which makes us aware of the existence of a strongly Afrocentric world in the very heart of a European capital, at a time in which migration from Africa to Italy was largely ignored as a phenomenon by Italian media and local scholars alike.

Once the sequence is over, we are back on a public bus, together with another Eritrean woman, travelling through the EUR, a neighbourhood that is considered as iconic of fascist-style architecture. Throughout the short ride, the same Eritrean man's voice-over that we heard earlier explains us that

la sua storia personale [della donna eritrea che sta viaggiando sull'autobus] riflette la storia dell'Eritrea, una storia fatta di colonialismo e di oppressione, prima dai turchi e dagli egizi, poi dal

⁴ Translation: "to discuss the political orientation of our political liberation front [the EPLF] and to rediscover our culture and keep our cultural traditions alive. These shared moments for us represent a response to the marginalization that we are forced to suffer in the big European cities."

colonialismo italiano del periodo fascista, e oggi dal colonialismo etiopico. Oggi il popolo eritreo lotta per la sua liberazione al pari degli altri popoli del terzo mondo⁵.

It is interesting to note how the emphasis, here and elsewhere in the film, is put on the connection between Italian colonialism and the fascist regime, even if the Italian occupation of Eritrea began much earlier than the arrival of Mussolini to power. This seems to mirror what was a common reading of the Italian colonial past in Italy at the time, a reading that allowed people to pretend that Italians were “brava gente”, good people (Del Boca 2005), and that colonialism had only been a parenthesis in the country’s recent past – the result of the fascist regime political ambitions and excessive use of violence. This reading of colonialism also helped in consolidating the complicity between EPLF and Italian leftist movements, around a common condemnation of fascism and its consequences at home and abroad.

Two more interviews with Eritrean women describing their exploitation follow this sequence, with the second one adding further interesting details about the tribulation encountered by these women to survive the hardship of their life in Italy. The interviewee in fact describes how, in order to escape her host family’s exploitation (including their demand to work sixteen hours a day with no week leaves), she went to the Ethiopian embassy and later to the *questura* (the police station), only to hear officials telling her that, since she had a contract with the family, they could not do anything about it. As a result, the woman explains, she fled the house overnight and found refuge in some fellow Eritrean’s home. This story allows her to offer further details on the political fabric of the Eritrean community in Italy:

sapevo dalla dura oppressione che avevo già vissuto nel mio paese che noi, per liberarci dallo sfruttamento, dovevamo lottare duramente. Pur avendo tutti questi problemi per poter vivere in Italia, noi eritrei all’estero siamo organizzati e ben uniti per seguire con la linea che ha il nostro fronte popolare di liberazione⁶.

The interview goes on describing the details of the EPLF activities among diasporic women living in Rome, including evening schools dedicated to the alphabetization and the ideological education of the community.

This sequence is particularly interesting as it points at the continuity between colonial forms of subjugation and the exploitation experienced in the colonial metropole. The woman underlines vigorously that belonging to a political movement based in her home country has made her political emancipation in the diaspora possible. This shows that, while much existing literature has insisted on the role that diasporas played in the

⁵ Translation: “her personal story [of the Eritrean woman travelling on the bus] reflects the history of Eritrea, a history of colonialism and oppression, first by the Turks and the Egyptians, then by Italian colonialism during the fascist period, and today by Ethiopian colonialism. Today the Eritrean people are fighting for their liberation like other third world peoples”.

⁶ Translation: “I knew from the harsh oppression that I had already experienced in my country that we had to fight hard to free ourselves from exploitation. Even though we have all these problems to be able to live in Italy, we Eritreans abroad are organized and well united to follow the line dictated by that our popular liberation front”.

organization and support of liberation movements across Africa, political activism in the home country also had an impact, the other way around, influencing the life of people away from home and helping them in their struggle against exploitation in the host country. No doubts, the strong and uncritical support that the film offers to the EPLF is a trace of Yemane's connection with the movement and a tribute to the capillary presence that the EPLF had in Rome throughout the 1960s and 1970s. And in this sense, the film willingly closes an eye on the fact that the Eritrean community in Rome, in those years, was going through a moment of strong political division between the supporters of the ELF and those of the newly formed organisation of the EPLF (cf. Pool 1980), and prefers to idealize the Eritreans in Rome as a homogeneous and politically coherent group. However, beyond its political partisanship, the film offers an original and insightful look into the political interactions existing between Africans in the diaspora and in the continent.

The following sequence explicitly declares its support for the EPLF through an interview with the movement spokesperson in Rome who discusses in fluent Italian the advancements of the struggle against Ethiopia and the reforms that the EPLF has introduced in the liberated villages in Eritrea. Here too a direct parallel is made between the struggle in the Horn, the complicated situation of the Eritrean refugees displaced in Sudan, and the life of the more than five thousand Eritrean migrants living in Italy, who are described as living in very difficult conditions. This confirms the idea, already expressed elsewhere in the film, that the liberation struggle against the Ethiopian hegemony at home and against postcolonial exploitation abroad are part of the same revolutionary effort.

The film then continues showing further images of political meetings held by the Eritrean community in the premises of the EPLF's Roman headquarters. The film closing sequence follows again an Eritrean woman wondering around the city of Rome, this time accompanied by an evocative song in Tigrinya, which makes the underlying nostalgia for the homeland physically palpable. The last shot is particularly significant: an Eritrean woman crosses an Italian family and the Italian woman turns to look at her. In so doing, the scene summarizes the particular experience of Eritrean women discussed in the film, and highlights how, in this period of Italian history, the burden of reproductive work is progressively shifted onto the shoulders of migrant women.

Re-envisioning the Italian past through the prism of African experiences

As the detailed analysis of the film suggests, *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a valuable document to open up our understanding of Italian recent past so as to re-envision it through the prism of the African experience. First of all, what this film highlights is the longer-term history of African migration to Italy. Far from the contemporary emphasis in the Italian political and media discourse on migration as a "crisis" and an "emergency"- terms that imply the unfolding of an unexpected and unprecedented phenomenon - *A testimonianza di una condizione* testifies for the scale and rootedness of the African presence in Italy well-before the late-1980s and early-1990s, the dates most

often mentioned to indicate the beginning of migration fluxes to Italy from Africa. As the Italian historian Valeria Deplano underscores, in fact,

even if in small numbers and located in specific areas of the country, the first foreigners arrived in Italy well before the 1980s, and many of them came from the former colonies. Starting from the mid-1960s and then in the 1970s, in conjunction with the wars that tormented the Horn of Africa, the large Italian cities were in fact the destination of the diaspora from Eritrea and Somalia. [For instance] in the 1970s Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians constituted 30% of the foreigners present in Rome (2014: 334, my translation; see also Andall 2005; Morone 2015).

The film vividly highlights the fact that women constituted an important share of these first waves of migration from Africa to Italy, and the specificity of their experience of life in the Peninsula offers important elements to complicate our understanding of Italian women's emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s (Gissi 2022). As Italian Studies scholar Jacqueline Andall's (2000) pioneer work on this topic shows, and *A testimonianza di una condizione* confirms, during this period Italian middle-class women were in many cases unable to radically transform the division of labour inside the family and instead opted to transfer the weight of the patriarchal organization of the private sphere on the shoulders of less advantaged, mostly immigrant women. "This dynamic, which involved the crucial articulation of competences considered inherently gendered, implie[d] much more than a mere economic exchange, which often weighed on the 'wife's' income and not on the overall family budget. This exchange entailed the reaffirmation of the idea that immigrants had to fulfil a biological destiny" (Gissi 2022: 136), that is, women's destiny to occupy the domestic sphere so as to allow Italian men to maintain their hegemonic position in the public space – the position they traditionally occupied in the Italian society. The women interviewed in the film well express the frustration that results from this situation. Because of the ongoing conflict in Eritrea and the influence that EPLF's Marxist-Leninist ideology played on them (Wilson 1991), many of these women had strong sentiments about the need to transform the role of women in society. They came to Italy with the ambition to study and build a better future for themselves and their country. These ambitions often conflicted with the aspirations of their Italian, upper-middle class counterparts, who more often than not ended up relying on immigrant female labour to replace them in their domestic tasks.

The underlying racism of the Italian society which many of the women in the film denounce, complicated the picture, making it difficult for these parallel struggles for emancipation to converge. As the film vividly show, while the number of immigrants in the country was still low, Italy was hardly the country of the "brava gente" that many Italians (back then and still today) believed it to be (cf. Del Boca 2005). Well before the tragic killing of Jerry Masslo in Villa Literno in 1989 and the public indignation that it provoked (Pompei 2020), black people were openly discriminated and stigmatised in the Italian society (Deplano 2014: 344-355). Leonardo de Franceschi's (2013) edited book on the history of the black presence on Italian screens since the early twentieth century clearly illustrate this point, but *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a visual document of

particular value in this sense as the experience of discrimination is narrated directly by the people who lived it, in explicit and unfiltered terms.

However, if *A testimonianza di una condizione* is certainly a document about the racism and discrimination experienced by an African community in Italy, it is also a document about the strength of the leftist political internationalism that grounded political and artistic complicities between African and European people. The vast and structured presence of the EPLF in Rome, which the film very-well explores, is not only the result of the intricate political aftermaths of the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea (Puddu 2019). It is also the result of the complex web of political collaborations that connected African liberation struggles and European leftist movements (Blum et al. 2022; Borruso 2009) as well as African and European artistic avantgardes (Caminati 2022; Mestman 2021; Gray 2020). If this vast horizon of artistic collaborations, political complicities, and long-term friendships has today almost gone out of sight, *A testimonianza di una condizione* shows that its historical importance should not be discarded. Its vision for the possibility of a different relation between Africa and Europe can in fact constitute a positive aspiration to counter the dystopic future of a xenophobic Europe, fortified onto itself.

Conclusion

In this essay I analysed an important as much as little-studied visual document about the experience of Eritrean people in Italy in the 1970s that can contribute to complexifying our understanding of the Italian recent past. In so doing I argued for the importance of considering African memories of Europe as constitutive of European memory and identity-making processes. As discussed throughout the essay, *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a document that offers several contributions in this sense.

First of all, it is a film that offers us a glimpse of the life of a section of an African community in Italy at a time in which almost no debate about migration to Italy from Africa yet existed, and thus contributes to reshaping the chronology of this phenomenon to better incorporate the experiences of the first waves of African migrants to the Peninsula, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, to our understanding of Italian social, cultural and demographic transformations in the twentieth century. By putting a particular accent on Eritrean people's testimonies of experiences of racism and exploitation in Italy, it also clearly opposes simplistic narratives about the Italian society's pretended welcoming attitude to foreigners, that characterized Italy's self-representation until recently. Secondly, by focusing in particular on the position of African women in this context, it contributes to complicating our understanding of women's struggles for emancipation in Italy over that period, and the diverging paths that at times this fight took for Italian and African women living side by side. Thirdly, by putting a particular emphasis on the political organization of members of the Eritrean community in Rome, the film shows the influence that African liberation movements had on the life of African diasporas living in Europe, as well as on their own struggles against exploitation. And it highlights the complicity that existed between such movements and the various instances of leftist political and artistic activism that were active in Europe at the time. Overall, the film invites us to take into consideration both the long-term history of exploitative and racist attitudes toward African people in

Italy, and the more encouraging existence of significant experiences of collaboration, complicity and solidarity which made the production of a film like *A testimonianza di una condizione* possible.

As the feminist theorist and historian of photography Laura Wexler suggested, visual documents like photographs and documentary films do not show us “the way things were”, but they rather testify for “a record of choices”, and “it is only through understanding the choices that have been made between alternatives—learning what won out and what was lost, how it happened and at what cost—that the meaning of the past can appear” (quoted in Campt 2012: 5). *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a film that makes the choice to testify for the violence and discrimination experienced by African migrants in Italy, but it does so by opting for the portrayal of strong, active and outspoken women (rather than resigned or passive victims), and for an artistic and political endeavour based on the solidarity between African and Italian intellectuals and artists. We face today the dilemma of similar choices about how to denounce existing injustices while investing in the possibility for intercultural dialogue and collaboration. *A testimonianza di una condizione* might offer us the inspiration to find the right answers.

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From representations to self-representations. Young people with a migrant background in the *Sguardi Plurali* photography exhibition

Abstract

Although Italy today is in fact a pluralistic country of multiple cultural views, its political and cultural institutions tend to represent a uniform national identity, reproducing a fixed consensus of what being Italian means. Processes of “othering” reproduce a reified concept of being Italian that excludes both young recent migrants and the children of immigrants. Structural processes of demarcation, exclusion and marginalisation are at play. This article is based on the photographic essays produced in 2021 and 2024 as part of the *Sguardi Plurali* (“Plural Glimpses”) project, a national competition and exhibition for photographers younger than age 35 who emigrated to Italy at a young age or were born in Italy to immigrant parents. After first analysing the rich visual materials and their accompanying text, I reflect on the contestants’ widely differing life stories, on the complex connections between migration experiences and the photographic records of it, and on the relationship between generalised representation and self-representation. I explore not only the final submissions, but the creative process itself, reconstructed through the voices of the photographers, as well as how the project came about.

Keywords

Photography; Self-representation; Migrants; Second generation; Youth.

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Introduction

Episode 1. It's a hot early summer afternoon, and we are in a large crowded hall in Trieste, at the opening of the photographic exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale* (Plural Glimpses into Plural Italy). A dark-skinned girl from the audience speaks up: "I was born in Italy, I studied in Italy. My parents were born in Nigeria. I'm worried because, in this country, which is my country, I have no voice. I mean, ever since I went to school, adults would tell me: either here or there; either Italian or forever an immigrant ... These photos are truly beautiful because they show how we are all different, each of us has our own way of seeing reality. But we're not that strange compared to other young people of our generation."

Episode 2. In the cloister of San Giovanni in Monte church, in Bologna, a young man of Pakistani origin is wandering among the same photos of the traveling exhibition. He timidly approaches me and introduces himself: "I took one of the photos on display. I came all the way from Rome to see my photo mounted alongside the others. I'm a political refugee, and when I did this work, I was living in a reception centre; now I live alone in a house and I have a job. I had never participated in a competition, this was the first opportunity in my life; it's wonderful to see other people stop, look at my photo, read what I wrote about myself, and want to know how I see Italy. Thank you!"

I open this article with these two encounters because they are significant and occurred at the openings of the travelling photo exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale* (Plural Glimpses into Plural Italy), a national competition for photographers younger than 35 living in Italy who had emigrated at a young age or were born in Italy to immigrant parents.¹

The first episode highlights how, in Italy, the issue of identity is deeply felt among young people with a migrant background. These young people experience significant public pressure in their daily life and often feel unrecognised (Ricucci 2014). As the Nigerian girl pointed out, photography can bring out these hidden selves.

The second episode shows how participation in a photography competition can be a meaningful experience for young people who, due to their personal life situations, such as having to seek asylum, never had the opportunity to express themselves artistically, especially through photography. The young man saw being included in a public exhibition as fundamental to being seen and heard by others, as such visibility often challenges the image that the dominant society has produced of you (Mirzoeff 2011). This issue is central to young asylum seekers, since the success of their applications for asylum depends on the self-image that they transmit to the authority figures who will be deciding their future. Asylum seekers fear being "mis-recognised," being seen in the "wrong" way" or not being seen at all (Santanera 2018; 2022).

¹ I organized this competition in the spring of 2021. Candidates were asked to send a short biography, detailing their migration experience or that of their parents, and to submit 10 photographs that told a story about that experience, with text putting that experience into words. In spring of 2024, I issued a second call for entries. Fifty photographic projects were submitted and exhibited in many Italian cities.

In Italy, the mainstream representation of Italian identity and belonging frequently excludes immigrants and their children (De Franceschi 2018; Giuliani 2019). The issue of these individuals' identity is highly complex because "Italianness" is a social construct, and some young people with immigrant backgrounds integrate and adapt, whereas others push back and reject adopting a new identity. Visual products, photography in particular, can explore these issues in a highly original and personal way.

In this piece, I intend to answer the following theoretical questions: How can photography by people who are unfairly targeted by culturally dominant narratives help to deconstruct those narratives? What are the central barriers that young people with a migrant background face when they talk about themselves? How can their art be linked to the theme of their Italianness? In the following section, I discuss the visual self-representation of migrants, and some central methodological issues that arose in organising the exhibition and analysing the submitted photos. Then I discuss the dominant image of young migrants that has been constructed in Italy. Using the submitted photographs, I deconstruct this dominant image through specific visual counter-narratives (Güell and Garcés-Mascreñas 2024). In the final section, I propose how these counter-narratives can be grouped into basic categories and typologies.

Migration and self-representation through photography

In the aftermath of the seminal work of John Berger and Jean Mohr (1975), who used visual images and poetry to study migration, there has been growing interest in visual methodologies in the academic field of international migration. This interest also manifests itself in the increasingly numerous visual representations of migration in the media (Cambre 2019; Martiniello 2017). De Genova speaks of the "spectacle of the border" to highlight how staged images along a country's border construct and confirm the power of the state, instantaneously producing discourse and public images that dehumanise and criminalise immigrants (De Genova 2013). Migration scholars have emphasised the need to reflect on the use of visual material in their research by analysing the ethical aspects, theoretical implications and methodologies involved (Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła 2023; Nikielska-Sekuła and Desille 2021; Cocco, Crespi and Crescenti 2022). Abstract and stereotypical representations of migrants circulate widely in the public discourse. As Nikielska-Sekuła and Desille point out, "we must start to find solutions [to the problem of] the reduction of migration experiences to one generic migrant figure. As such, a visual methodology holds the potential to multiply and complexify accounts of migration" (2021: 19).

In the proliferation of stereotypical images in the public debate, researchers who use photography to study migration phenomena must be very careful about which elements to highlight and why. It is essential to be aware that every visual image is essentially a creative undertaking. This awareness corrects the false perception of photography as simply the transparent reproduction of reality (Banks 1988). Photographic "truth" is indeed a myth. All photography involves acts of selection, framing and personalisation that stem from subjective choices. The camera always

mediates, and its visual products are the result of a co-constructed relationship between what photographers “see” from their cultural perspective, the subjects that are represented, and the audiences for these visual products (Frisina 2016). Photographs are unprocessed, ambiguous, fleeting and changing in meaning and hold enormous potential for expression. This is especially true for photographs that are taken, handled, collected, exchanged and archived in the depiction of immigrants (Troelenberg *et al.* 2020).

In full recognition of above, I emphasise how photography can be an important means of self-representation for migrants. Thy Pu (2018) underlines how important it is to centre visual self-representations because they counter “the danger of perpetuating imbalanced visual encounters more concerned with how distant spectators view refugees and less with how refugees view themselves” (Pu 2004: 135). Cabañes highlights how photography can be a means of interpreting “migrant voices.” He refers to the “migrants’ capacity to speak, and to be heard speaking about their lives and the social conditions in which their lives are embedded” (Cabañes 2017: 33). Photography has three qualities that enable it to play this role. The testimonial character of photography, referring to its indexical properties, allows narratives to be made concrete and authentic. Photography’s iconic properties allow migrants not only to speak about their individual experience, but to refer more broadly to all migrants’ experience and to translate personal memories into collective memories. The medium’s symbolic properties allow meaning to be attributed to visual narratives. Cabañes discusses how, through a collaborative photography project, Indian and Korean migrants in Manila realised a self-representation of themselves, which challenged the dominant culture’s representations of them. For many migrants, photography also serves as a means of preserving memory and cultural heritage. This aspect of self-representation goes beyond mere documentation, becoming an act of resistance against cultural erasure. Migrants’ own images affirm their identities, preventing them from being erased or subsumed as generic “immigrants” instead allowing them to be sustained and celebrated in photos that are shared across generations. For example, Phu and Dewan discuss projects meant to reflect on self-representations in family photo archives (2017).

Social media have expanded the reach and impact of migrants’ photography, allowing self-representative images to reach global audiences instantly. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide spaces where migrants can tell their stories directly, often using hashtags to connect their stories to broader themes. The immediacy and accessibility of social media allow for real-time self-representation, amplifying migrant voices and expanding their visibility in ways that traditional media often do not. Giovanna Santanera (2018) analyses the functions of digital images taken with smartphones and shared on social media by young African asylum seekers. These online images circulate widely among friends and acquaintances in Italy and among others in the African diaspora; they encapsulate how young immigrants visualise their aspirations. To understand their views and aspirations, Chiara Denaro asked young migrants to share with her digital images taken during their journeys to Europe and after their arrival in Italy (Denaro 2016). Chiara Pilotto (2023), in her analysis of videos depicting racist

violence circulated by Nigerian asylum seekers in Italy, highlights how these videos enable migrants to disseminate self-identifications that offer an alternative to the dominant, racialised narratives in public discourse (Godin and Donà 2016).

By taking control of how they are portrayed, migrants also reclaim agency over their own narratives. Self-representation through photography becomes a form of self-advocacy, allowing migrants to counter the reductive and often damaging portrayals of migration in popular media. In documenting their own experiences and sharing them publicly, migrants encourage empathy and understanding among viewers. Through this process, photography becomes not just a medium of individual expression but also fosters dialogue around migration, identity and the shared human experience.

Vivienne and Burgess (2013) explore the politics of self-representation and personal photography on social media, using the digital storytelling movement as a case study. Small groups of participants at risk of cultural exclusion share personal images and identity narratives - including family photographs, manipulated images and stock photos. These online-curated self-exhibitions involve processes of selection, manipulation, and editing of personal photographic content, and are described as forms of "everyday activism" or "networked identity work."

Scholars have focused not only on the production of digital images and their use on social media by migrants, but also on how these images are reappropriated and recontextualized by mainstream media. Chouliaraki (2020) examines migrant self-representation through selfies and their deployment in digital journalism. The selfie articulates and circulates claims to the self as an authentic presence and, in doing so, invites viewers to engage with this presence through various forms of sympathetic spectatorship. In digital journalism these selfies are recontextualized and absorbed into dominant visual economies, shaped by journalistic norms of appropriateness and newsworthiness - criteria that determine who becomes visible, how they are portrayed, and why their stories are deemed worth telling. Within this process of selection, a symbolic bordering takes place - one that establishes prevailing standards of humanity, recognition, and voice. Migrants' self-representations are thus appropriated and embedded within institutional frameworks of visibility, and in this incorporation, they often lose their agency.

The self-representation of migrants can also be studied through specific visual-research methods, such as photo-elicitation and photo-voice.² These methods provide a democratic means of self-expression and self-exploration through extracting the evocative nature of images. Migrants, through photographs, can narrate how they have adapted to their new multi-ethnic neighbourhoods (Collier 1957). In other cases, young migrants have used photography to describe their health and well-being (Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck 2012); migrant women have discussed their emotional condition

² In photo-elicitation research, migrants take photographs that act as conversation starters in interviews, prompting mutually interesting back-and-forths between interviewer and interviewee, and serving as a probing tool to uncover meaning within complex social worlds (Harper 2022). In photo-voice research, participants are given cameras and guided to use them to capture significant aspects of their lives. The investigators and subjects decide together on the methods, timing and objectives of such photo-based research (Piemontese 2021).

(Thomsen 2021); young political refugees have reflected on their forms of civic participation (Joyce and Liamputtong 2022); and elderly migrants have reflected on their social relationships (Salma and Themuri 2024). “Immigrant Sisterhood” is an Italian ethnographic project in which young women asylum seekers in first reception centres in Sardinia showcased aspects of their lives through images, overriding the dominant visual representation of refugee women as helpless victims or sexualized objects (Tiefenthaler and Lynch 2021). Photography can be a very effective tool for young migrants to explore their relationships within local communities (Marzana et al. 2023) or to describe how they experience religion (Frisina and Bertolani 2016). All these examples of photographic self-representation challenge conventional narratives, presenting a more diverse, personal and human view of migration. Photography thus becomes transformative, allowing individuals not only to depict their realities but also to assert their identities and bridge cultural divides, creating new pathways for connection and understanding. In the next sections, I discuss the self-representations that emerged from the exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale*.

On Methods. From the organisation of the competition to the discussion of the projects

In my project on the visual self-representations created by young people with a migrant background, I made some methodological choices that I briefly summarise here. I decided to involve several established and professionally active visual artists and photographers from immigrant backgrounds from the beginning (from the moment the call for entries went out). These artists not only participated in all phases of the competition but also sat on the jury, which thus had professionals with similar characteristics to those of the contestants. The inclusion of senior migrant photographers in working groups as advisors is a strategy adopted in photography projects (Phu and Dewan 2017; Sheehan 2018). The calls for entries promoted maximum freedom of expression, specifying that contestants could create a project in any photography genre, including documentary photography, portrait photography, street photography and abstract photography. Thus, contestants were not restricted to a single genre and were encouraged to explore a full range of creative possibilities. Allowing expressive freedom is an important requirement in all photographic projects aimed at promoting self-representation (Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła 2023). Great care was taken to disseminate the calls for entries to reach the widest possible audience.³

One last methodological aspect must be emphasised. In the competition announcement, I specified that all the photos and material submitted would be publicly disseminated in an exhibition, in the catalogue and also on multimedia platforms, such

³ Collaboration between the sponsoring organisations was fundamental. The wide variety of sponsoring institutions ensured that the contestants represented diverse backgrounds and experiences. The sponsoring organizations were: two prominent photography and film centres (Camera-Centro Italiano per la Fotografia and Società Umanitaria Carbonia); two research non-profits that study migration (Forum Internazionale ed Europeo di Ricerche sull'Immigrazione, or FIERI; and the Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà, or DISCI, Università di Bologna); and one very large Italian cultural and political non-profit (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana, or ARCI).

as websites (i.e., <https://fieri.it/sguardiplurali/>). The contestants were therefore aware that their images and biographical information were for public use. When I prepared the catalogue, I sent the contestants the selected images, captions and texts for their approval. In some cases, the photographers asked for changes.

After the photos were exhibited, I conducted an ethnographic analysis of the images; that analysis evolved into this article. For this phase of the analysis, I selected photographic projects - among all those submitted - that fulfilled one or more of the following criteria: they featured a clearly autobiographical dimension; they offered insight not only into the photographer's own life but also into the lives of their peers; and they engaged with themes of intergenerational relationships, collective memory, and the past.

At different stages of the project, I played different roles: I initiated the call for the competition; I served on the jury; I organised the exhibition; and I interpreted the meaning of the visual materials (Cabañes 2017). A few ethical-methodological reflections on identity politics in research are in order. When the visual material produced by others becomes the subject of reflection by the ethnographer, the issue of the complex relationship between the researcher and those who produced the images emerges (Allan 2012). In the context of a photo competition, the young photographers created subjective views of their selves that reinforced their identities on an individual and community level. The ethnographer's interpretation of these images requires an ethical responsibility to respect the subjects studied (Fabietti 1999). For this reason, all the images selected for this article were signed off on by the photographers; I also shared and discussed my interpretations of the works with the photographers during the writing of the article.

The organisation of this exhibition has allowed me, as an anthropologist, to intertwine my perspective with the perspectives of the young photographers involved. There was a constant negotiation over the meanings of the photographs. The first interpretation was the reality that the contestants captured in their photographs; the second interpretation was mine, that of the anthropologist who, in collaboration with the photographer, observed and interpreted the images. Photography always involves mediating between images and reality; the exhibition helped me access each artist's subjective view and interpretation of their world, something that could not have been achieved with written materials alone.

Dominant photographic representations of young people of foreign origin. Deviant or exceptional

As Pogliano and Solaroli (2012) point out, immigration has a fixed visual geography in Italy with established, uniform interpretations in the media.⁴ Images of them as "regular" people going about their daily lives are rare, with few images showing how multiple

⁴ This geography of popular images has its key locations, such as the country's southernmost island of Lampedusa, which is associated with "illegal immigrants" coming from the African continent. Similarly, rural Southern Italy is depicted as being overrun with immigrant "slaves" working in agriculture, and the outskirts of Rome as being marred by camps built for the Roma, to name a few more examples.

population groups coexist. When native-born Italians are present in these photographs, they often belong to law enforcement or humanitarian groups. These images result from a deliberate, multi-tiered framing process. Photographers select certain aspects of reality and signal them as part of a specific informational “text” to promote “a particular definition of a problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation” (Entman 1993: 52). Abstract, out-of-context and stock photos of the immigration experience often predominate in the media. This aspect has been analysed in several media, including newspapers (Gariglio *et al* 2010), television, the Internet and cinema (King and Wood 2013). Benson (2013) distinguishes three prevalent visual frames for migrants as subjects of photography: the threat frame, the victim frame and the hero frame. In the threat frame, migration is linked to crime, deviant behaviour and urban decay—with migrants posing a clear threat to the national culture of the destination country. The victim frame foregrounds the most vulnerable migrants. The hero frame celebrates the migrant as perfectly integrated into the destination country’s culture, but always elevated by the “exceptional,” and based on the stories of specific individuals, such as foreign-born athletes or artists.

These three frames also apply to the visual representation of young people with a migration background. One of the most widespread treatments is portraying these young people as “deviant others.” Young migrants are associated with youth crime and urban marginalisation.⁵ Images of young immigrants involved in street life, urban conflict and gangs are widespread (Queirolo Palmas 2009) and are particularly damaging. Opposing a deviant and marginalising frame is one of upward social mobility that highlights young migrants’ success. While these representations are positive, emphasising overcoming formidable obstacles to achieve outstanding results, they can be problematic if they overlook the structural disparities and systemic challenges that many similar youths still face. These success narratives are highly individualised and often take on the characteristics of an idealised portrait. Young migrants are often excluded, even from photographic images, from debates on the issues that most directly concern them, such as the reform of the citizenship law (Zincone and Basili 2013; Howard 2009).⁶ No “second generation” immigrants have been interviewed by journalists; they remain invisible, as do their views on the laws that would redefine their lives.

Political and cultural institutions tend to uniformly represent nationhood, reproducing fixed images of what it means to share a national identity (Favell 2022). In the Italian case, early efforts to forge a cohesive Italian identity were driven by a need to create a sense of unity from profound diversity. Visual elements were strategically selected to build a narrative of continuity and greatness, masking the deep inequalities and internal divisions. This attempt at national cohesion laid the groundwork for

⁵ Photographic images place them, for example, at protests and at the centre of civil unrest. Media coverage of protests involving second-generation immigrants often highlight moments of violence or confrontation.

⁶ According to current Italian law, children who were born in the country to immigrant parents have to wait to apply for citizenship until their 18th birthday. The main requirement is uninterrupted legal residence in Italy since birth. This citizenship law, approved in 1992, is stricter than those adopted by other EU countries. Although there have been several attempts to amend the citizenship law since the late 1990s, none has been successful.

exclusionary practices. National identity became tied to narrow cultural markers - being ethnically Italian, speaking standardized Italian, and conforming to Catholic and Eurocentric norms. (Schneider 1998). These early internal divisions set a precedent for how the nation would later respond to external “others,” particularly immigrants. In many ways, Italy's nation-building project required an “us” versus “them” dynamic, cementing a vision of national identity that has remained relatively rigid well into the 21st century (Triandafyllidou 1998; Andall 2002). Since the 1990s, the media have perpetuated stereotypical representations of migrants born outside Italy, mostly aimed at questioning their belonging in the country and to the national community. Although no single characteristic defines what it means to be Italian, the continuous “otherisation” of migrants produces a reified Italianness by a process of elimination—i.e., it is defined by what migrants are *not* (Giuliani 2019). Young people with dark skin are still very rarely represented visually among the newest generations of Italians. In photographs of young people in the Italian media and in news reports on work, school or cultural events, one very rarely finds dark-skinned young people, underlining how new migrants are often excluded from the national, collective imagination (Grimaldi 2022). In his work on the representation of second-generation youth in Italian cinema and television, De Franceschi (2018) highlights how many media narratives still perpetuate negative stereotypes. The public representations of young people with a migrant background are constructed by the mainstream media; these young people rarely produce their own images. With a few exceptions, young people from an immigration background do not hold prominent positions in photojournalism, publishing and the photography market. As De Franceschi points out:

More and more young “G2s” feel the need to tell their stories, sensing the widespread absence of second generations in the hegemonic narrative of Italy. There is a hetero-constructed image of what being Italian means that is produced by Italian directors and screenwriters, who rarely have direct and in-depth knowledge of the complex issues of this segment of Italian society. (De Franceschi 2018: 259)

Supporting the products of the “eyes” of young photographers with a migrant background is the only way to counter the stigmatising and othering portrayals of migrants as threat, victim or hero (Güell and Garcés-Mascreñas 2024). In the following section, I analyse content from three sources: the submitted photographs, the biographies and notes prepared by the photographers, and interviews conducted with some of the contestants.⁷ I have selected five photographers and, for each of them, I highlight the central themes raised by their work, quoting their own words about their images. The aim is also to discuss how their various styles bring out their points of view and convey their central messages.

⁷ Although it could be very interesting to study the processes of circulation, re-appropriation and consumption of images (Rose 2022), this article excludes discussions of how the photographs were used after the exhibition (Awad 2020) and how visitors engaged with the stories told by the photographers. My analysis is limited to the production of the photographs and the meanings attributed to them by their creators.

The battle for recognition

Photographic images can play a central role in the recognition that photographers seek from the observers of their images. Here I take up the concept of recognition as formulated by Honneth (1995); he distinguishes between three forms of recognition: affective recognition, social recognition and legal recognition.⁸ For young people with a migrant background, photographic self-representation is a way in which the struggle for recognition is realized. This plea for recognition may begin in the affective sphere, extend into the social sphere, and ultimately reach the legal sphere. The work of Karim El Maktafi, a young photographer with Moroccan parents, evokes all these dimensions. He introduces his photographic project as follows:

At a time in history when the discussion on *jus soli* [birthright citizenship] seems to have been completely dropped from the Italian political agenda, I want to show the faces of those who every day come to terms with the absence of birthright citizenship and the lucky few who manage to obtain citizenship at the age of 18. Telling the story of the “second generation” means asking what these young people’s vision of their future is—what they expect of love, of friends, of school. It is not easy to give an answer, but I believe that a story and a visual investigation of their/our present can give viewers an honest image of those who, despite difficulties and antiquated, inhumane laws, are fully entitled to be Italian citizens.

As these words show, the aim of Karim’s visual investigation is explicitly political, that is, the legal recognition of citizenship for young people born in Italy to immigrant parents. As we will see later, the use of photographic portraiture is key to realizing this objective.

Karim El Maktafi is a photographer born in 1992 to Moroccan parents in Desenzano del Garda, Italy. After gaining early experience in photography, he moved to Milan, where he attended a photography academy and later began working as a professional photographer.

His submission, entitled “They Call Us Second Generation,” features group photos of boys and girls in various open spaces in Milan and close-up portraits of individuals in house interiors. Underlying Karim’s work is a reflection on his own experience growing up, feeling “poised between two realities”—the one he experienced within his family, and the one required by socialisation at school and in interactions with peers. Drawing from these personal experiences and contradictions, Karim decided to explore how he and others who were born in Italy to immigrant parents navigate their relationships. The

⁸ Honneth states that recognition is an essential condition for the personal and social development of individuals and he identifies three main forms. The first is affective recognition (love or care), which occurs in close interpersonal relationships (such as with family or friends) and refers to the individual being recognised for their vulnerability and need for emotional support. The second type is social recognition (social esteem), which concerns the appreciation by society of an individual’s skills, competences and social contributions. The third type is legal recognition (respect), in which the individual is recognised as having legal rights and duties, contributing to their moral autonomy. The three forms of recognition (affective, social and legal) are interconnected and contribute to the psychological and social well-being of individuals.

individuals portrayed by Karim engage the observer with looks that are often defiant and convey a profound awareness.

In one photograph, a girl with tattooed arms poses, relaxed, on a cluttered couch, an Amazon parcel behind her, and a drawing of a colourful toucan above her head, staring directly at the photographer (and us).



Photo 1 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Another photo, taken in a public park, shows a girl proudly wearing a hijab, a symbol of her Muslim identity, with a skateboard under her feet, referring to one of her favourite activities. Frisina and Hawtorne (2018) have shown how wearing a “fashionable” Islamic head covering is for the daughters of immigrants a way of contesting the othering that targets their bodies and excludes them from the public representation of Italianness with its gendered markers of whiteness. The girl, by agreeing to be portrayed this way by the photographer, aims to convey a specific message about her identity.



Photo 2 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Another photograph shows a group of three adolescent males; the one in the centre is in focus, eyes downcast with a pensive expression. The other two boys are increasingly out of focus—the one right next to the protagonist looks off into the distance, while the one in the background is so out of focus that his face is nearly obscured. This photo strongly expresses the dynamic between individual and group identities, between collective identification and differentiation, so important to Karim.



Photo 3 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Karim, in this project, builds a dialogue with a community that, as emphasised in the collection's title, is seen by others as a single monolith, but is made up of myriad individuals. His aim is to normalise these young people by highlighting their aesthetic tastes, passions and clothing styles, which are basically the same as those of all other Italian adolescents.

These young people claim an Italian identity that is denied to them, and at the same time, they re-signify this Italian identity, attributing new meanings to it (Grimaldi and Vicini 2024). What unites these young people despite their intrinsic differences (in terms of gender, degree of religiosity or social class), is their being denied legal status as Italian citizens. For this reason, Karim's project has the explicitly political goal of advocating for migrants to obtain legal recognition through citizenship.

The use of portraiture serves this purpose. A crucial aspect of photographic portraiture is its ability to evoke emotions and generate empathy (Roberts 2011). Images can convey deep feelings of joy, grief, hope and resistance, inviting viewers to connect with the experiences of others. This emotional dimension of affective recognition works on two levels. On the one hand, it aims to intimately move viewers; on the other hand, it also aims to mobilise viewers in the public space to act. The portrait reduces social distances between subjects and observers. The young people in the frame look directly out at the photographer and the viewer, with all three—subject, viewer and photographer—being social equals (Van Leeuwen 2008).⁹

Karim's photographic portraits also directly challenge the Italian racial imaginary.¹⁰ The gazes of his subjects—hijab-wearing young women or young men with dreadlocks—are demanding the "right to look" of people in a subaltern social position (Mirzoeff 2011). Through capturing these young people's bodies and faces, Karim wants to normalise the public images of second-generation immigrants and, at the same time, convey their battle for social recognition and legal recognition through citizenship. Karim's work centres on the present. However, photography can also serve as a means of bridging the gap between the photographer's contemporary experience and his/her family history - as well as the histories of others people. Photographic images have the power to illuminate the transnational ties that link young migrants with their relatives, while also offering a point of comparison with the transnational ties forged during past migrations. These themes are central to the analysis of the following photographic project.

Emotional attachments, multiple migrations and transnational ties

The identity of children of migration can also be nurtured by transnational ties. Within this context, affective relationships play a crucial role in familial and social frameworks. These transnational affective relationships are complex and can be ambivalent. While such ties provide emotional support and continuity, they can also create tensions and feelings of guilt due to physical separation. Missing the people one leaves behind and one's homeland is a central fact of the migrant experience (Baldassar 2018; Boccagni

⁹ Van Leeuwen explains that in photography, the subjects represented and the viewers of those photographed subjects form a relationship based on three aspects: the distance between the viewer and the photographed subjects (spatial distance connoting social distance); the perspective from which the photo is taken (from above exercises power, horizontal means a direct relationship); and the subject's gaze (if the person depicted looks directly at the observer, he builds a relationship).

¹⁰ Regarding the power of photographs to mobilize, other scholars have reflected on how images of racist violence have been used by African-Americans to build their claims, counteracting the media portrayal that depicts Afro-descendants as suspects and criminals (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

and Baldassar 2015). Young migrants often keep up with their families and communities through communication technologies, such as making video calls and posting photos on social media, fostering a sense of virtual closeness. These images transmitted from one's new country allow young people from immigrant backgrounds to be in contact with their past and present simultaneously. Baldassar points out how "the emotion of longing for and missing people and places therefore appears to be an integral (though not essential) feature of the kin-work and emotional labour needed to maintain transnational relationships" (Baldassar 2018: 250).

The work of another contestant, Oleksandra Horobets from Ukraine, highlights the emotional power of photographs exchanged between parents and children who are separated by migration. Oleksandra Horobets was born in Ukraine in 1997. When she was very young, her mother left for Italy, leaving her in the care of her maternal grandparents. When she was eight years old, Oleksandra was finally reunited with her mother in Naples. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and then attended the Higher Institute for Artistic Industries in Urbino. Her work is a highly original, visual reflection that links her own story of separation from family with the stories of others who also left home and loved ones behind.

Oleksandra's project alternates between photographs of her mother, photographs of herself from childhood, and physical fragments of letters sent by her mother. These are interspersed with photographs of people and objects found in an abandoned house in a small town in southern Italy.

Oleksandra recounts entering this house and discovering that the owners had emigrated abroad, leaving behind personal belongings, furniture and photographs. She used the interior of the house to set the visual story of *Kolobok*, the protagonist of a Slavic fairy tale about a loaf of bread that, as soon as it comes out of the oven, comes to life and runs away, being chased by people and animals. Oleksandra writes:

Entering the house, touching, investigating among the letters scattered on the floor and the photos, I found myself in a house that was not mine, seeing myself in the photos and their unknown subjects' gaze. The calendar was stuck in the year 2003; it was the home of Italian emigrants. And it was here that I decided to set my photograph, retelling the plot of the fairy tale.

The following photograph represents the interior of the house in which Oleksandra has placed a large loaf of bread.



Photo 4 *Kolobok*. Photo by Oleksandra Horobets, 2021.

The relationship with her mother is a central theme for the photographer, and it is through the photographs sent by her mother that this relationship was built. Oleksandra reflects:

The first time I saw my mother was in a photograph that she sent me when I was six years old. In the first few years after she left, I used to ask my father: 'What does my mother look like?' 'Bobbed hair and red lips,' he would answer. That was the image I had of my mother until we started sending each other pictures. It became our only way of communicating—through photography.

The photograph below is a combination of a photo found in the house and a portrait of Oleksandra's mother.



Photo 5 *Kolobok*. Photo by Oleksandra Horobets, 2021.

Oleksandra's work is a profound reflection on the psychological and emotional experience of living in a transnational family. This dimension is also connected to a reflection on the shared experience of migration across societies—that of Italians moving to foreign countries and of immigrants coming to Italy—a theme that has also drawn the interest of scholars (King and Skeldon, 2010). In Oleksandra's case, a central element of

her identity as a daughter of migrants is her relationship with her mother. This transnational relationship is visually reconstructed through the use of personal photographs, placed within a symbolic visual narrative, that of *Kolobok*. Photography highlights another crucial aspect: the identities of second-generation youth are internally diverse, shaped by multiple social and cultural influences. These identities defy rigid classification and reject any demand for singular loyalty. These aspects emerge in the photo diary discussed in the next section.

The Search for New Anchors to People and Places

In the history of photography there is a long tradition of photographic diaries to narrate autobiographical experiences (Jones 2006). A photo diary is a visual form of documentation that captures moments, experiences or events through a series of photographs, often accompanied by short notes, captions or reflections. It is similar to a written diary but primarily relies on images to convey personal memories, emotions or the progression of time. It can be a powerful tool for a young migrant to explore and express their evolving sense of identity. Each image reflects moments of adaptation, nostalgia or belonging, allowing the person to visually narrate their journey of self-discovery (Rose 2016). A visual diary serves not only to personally reflect but also to build a connection with the diary's viewers. The third contestant whose work I describe, Danielle Souza da Silva, explores her existential condition as a daughter of migrants by creating a photographic diary.

Danielle was born in Brazil in 1997. She grew up there with her mother and adoptive father until the age of seven, when she moved to Bergamo with her two brothers. In Bologna, she took a university course in Development and International Cooperation. Danielle has travelled extensively for study and work in England, Bulgaria, and Holland.

Her photographic diary, *Ship's Logbook*, presents portraits of people important to her: her siblings, her maternal grandmother, her mother, her Swedish boyfriend and her best friend of Moroccan origin. These are alternated with photos of places, such as her house in Bergamo and glimpses of urban neighbourhoods. Danielle writes:

I visually created pieces of my life that can be fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Mainly through visual testimonies that contain symbols and stories. Inside there are two chapters: the first five images talk about my family and my origins. The other five, on the other hand, tell of my journey away from home—to Bologna, via Sicily, and to other “places” I encountered indirectly, such as Sweden or Morocco, the birthplaces of loved ones with whom I established strong emotional ties.

A composite identity emerges, full of references to different social and cultural spaces. There is a dominant representation in which “second generation” youth live between two national paradigms, two social contexts and two forms of belonging (Grimaldi 2022). However, in her diary, Danielle shows how her social and emotional life occupies multiple identities and geographical poles (Thomassen 2010).

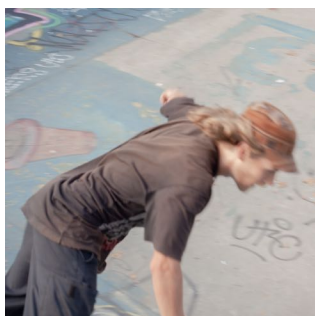


Photo 6 Ship's Logbook. Photo by Danielle Souza da Silva, 2021.

Danielle writes about this image:

Hannes is my boyfriend. We met in Bologna through skateboarding, a sport we both practice. He came to Italy from Sweden by foot for most of the journey. The culture of skateboarding has not only given me him, but it has also given me the pleasure of making friends with so many people from different countries and places; crucially, the skateboarding community integrated me into Italy.

A culture of transnational movement clearly emerges from the words and photographs of this young woman. The positive values of discovery, autonomy and cultural blending are attributed to the phenomena of physical and social displacement. This attitude is shared by many young people with an immigration background like hers:

As part of a new generation, the "second generation," I have often felt myself to be at the forefront of where global society is heading in fits and starts. In my awareness of belonging to more than one culture at the same time, I can welcome everyone and all diversities without renouncing my origins, and without having to feel threatened by the speed and novelty of change.

While Danielle recognises the importance of movement and travel in her life, she also feels the need to anchor her identity to specific places and people for a sense of security and belonging. In this regard, I present the emblematic image of the swallows outside the window of the house in Bergamo:



Photo 7 Ship's Logbook. Photo by Danielle Souza da Silva, 2021.

Here is Danielle's comment on the photograph:

During the first lockdown, I went back to my parents' house for a couple of months after returning from Erasmus. During that time, I watched swallows build a nest under the roof of the house over several days. Being cooped up at home gave me the chance to reconnect with my family and rediscover my own sense of home.

The images in Danielle's photo diary, as in the case of Oleksandra's photos, provoke emotion in the viewers (Campt 2017).¹¹ Danielle also includes in her diary many portraits of loved ones; the people are depicted frontally and gaze directly at the viewers, creating a connection and a sense of familiarity that reduces social distances. Danielle's work centers on her personal experiences and emotional connections. For young migrants, photography is not only a means to explore their own situation, but also a tool to reconstruct and make visible the connections with the stories of previous generations.

Memory and genealogy

The visual archives of colonialism preserve symbolic material that shapes what Giuliani (2018) describes as "figures of race." These archives serve as a lens through which postcolonial society still interprets events and contexts from a racially hegemonic perspective. Giuliani's concept of "figures of race" refers to images that, over time, accumulate across cultures, crystallizing specific meanings associated with human bodies—meanings that are deeply gendered and racialised. Today, perceived threats to national homogeneity and to a stable racial identity are projected onto the clearly defined "other." This construction of the racialised "other" serves two main functions: First, it rationalises discrimination, exploitation and differential inclusion; second, it establishes a contrasting background that helps construct whiteness as a normative ideal, thereby shaping, authorising and reinforcing a racially stratified social hierarchy.

The aim of the work of the next contestant, Deka Osman, is to subvert this hierarchy and to show how her Italianness is built on the legacy of previous generations of Somali migrants. She creatively reinterprets her family's photographic history to challenge the portrayal of migrants as racialised "others."

Deka Mohamed Osman was born in Turin in 1994 to Somali parents. She grew up in a very large family; both parents, an activist and theatre-actress mother and a doctor father, emigrated from Somalia in the early 1980s. She graduated from a design institute in 2018 and has since worked as a visual artist and filmmaker. In her project, she used photographs from family archives, passport photos, residence-permit photos

¹¹ Scholar Tina Campt highlights how photographs have the power to generate experiential intensity, and how the dimensions of looking, feeling and listening are co-present in viewers' relationship with images. She argues that images contain an affective dimension that resonates with viewers. She suggests that photographs have the power to express their subjects' emotions, enabling viewers to engage emotionally with the images and thus experience empathy toward the people depicted (Campt 2017).

and studio portrait photos. She reworked these photographs and assembled them into a collage.

Some photographs are from her childhood when, for example, she went on holiday with her sisters. Others are photographs of her mother before she married; still others date from the 1980s and 1990s and depict Somalis who no longer live in Italy: university students, young women in Western clothing posing in front of their cars, family portraits, etc.

Deka provides images of an East African country where Italy has long had a physical presence, starting with the colonial period of the late nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, Somalis have reversed that trajectory and emigrated to Italy. Following a common pattern in the Somali diaspora, many of the individuals depicted in Deka's photographs started their new lives in Italy before settling in other countries such as England, the United States or Canada. In her photo collage, for instance, Deka combines the photos of identity documents with copies of residence permits. In this way, she humanises the immigration bureaucracy by linking the required standardised documentation and paperwork to real people at a specific point in time.

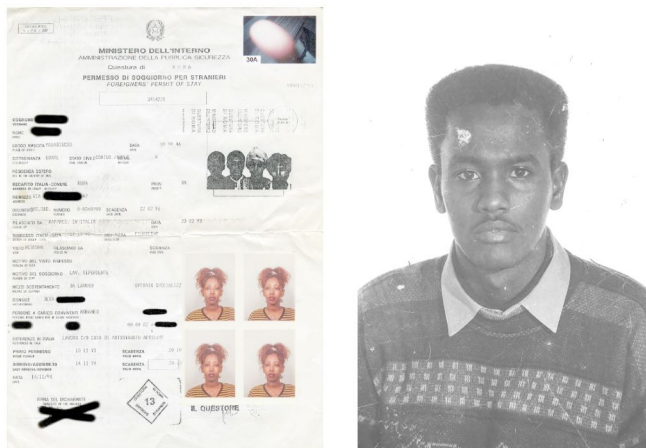


Photo 9. Ir-regular life. Photo by Deka Mohamed Osman, 2024.

This is her comment on the photo collage:

Collage with valid residence permit from 1993 to 1994. Scanned passport photos of a young Somali girl with red hair. She currently lives in Utrecht, Holland; is the mother of five children; and wears a veil. Passport photo scan of young Somali boy in Turin. Today he lives and works in the USA, in Seattle.

Deka mainly selects images of women that connect Somali diaspora generations, creating a symbolic bridge between herself and an earlier generation of migrants. The photograph below depicts Deka in her mother's arms, physically connecting the two generations.



Photo 9. Ir-regular life. Photo by Deká Mohamed Osman, 2024.
1994, Turin, birth of the second generation

Deká introduces her work with these words:

This project is not limited to preserving the historical memory of a community of immigrants from Somalia, a culture that has always been nomadic, but also aims to stimulate a broader discussion of issues of identity, belonging and coexistence. Through these images and stories, I hope to build solid bridges of mutual understanding. Today, a new generation of young Somalis, much more diverse than in the past, is growing up and being educated in Italy. Soon this generation will ask questions that require answers other than the traditional ones.

Deká's work, through the use of personal archives, brings to light three very important issues. First, it adds historical depth to migration representations, which are often flattened in the dominant discourse to the present and de-historicised. Second, it centres the centrality and agency of women, who are often placed in the background and in passive positions compared to men in diaspora narratives. Third, it prompts us to reflect on the links that new generations build with their past. Deká, as a member of this new generation of Afro-Italians, proposes her family archive and deconstructs the racialised social hierarchy that emerges from the colonial archives and that is still present in many examples of visual communication in Italy.

De-humanisation and irony

The images produced by new Italians can use irony as a tool to overturn identity and cultural stereotypes. In analysing videos created and circulated on TikTok by people with a migrant background, Bachis (2024) highlights how humour and irony create "complex and contradictory subordinate voices that transcend the boundaries of various hegemonic national identities" (Bachis 2024: 261). Through images and videos, new Italians ironically expose the most common forms of misrecognition of their Italian identity and challenge certain cultural preconceptions, including the notion that they must necessarily be connected to their parents' origins.

Irony in photography involves creating an image that conveys a meaning contrary to what is expected. This technique plays on visual contradictions, juxtapositions or incongruities to provoke thought and critique societal norms (Grundberg 1999). The

next contestant, Mounir Derbal, uses irony in his work as a powerful tool to denounce the dehumanisation faced by migrants.

Mounir Derbal is a young man born in Italy in 1997 to Algerian parents. After studying film directing in London, he returned to Italy and studied screenwriting. He teaches in Italian film schools. His project is a mock photographic reportage investigating what Mounir calls the “Androids of the Proletariat.” He mixes archival photos, original shots and images of androids at work produced with generative artificial intelligence. There are robot babysitters, robot hotel doormen, robot house cleaners, robot grocers, etc. These robots care for and interact with white-skinned humans. The concept of the immigrant as a robot highlights the dehumanising ways in which migrants are often portrayed or treated. Like robots, immigrants are viewed as labourers, expected to perform demanding, repetitive or undesirable tasks with little regard for their personal needs, emotions or individuality. In Mounir’s photographs, these robots are depicted in the scene as distant, which creates both a sense of symbolic distancing and an effect of symbolic disempowerment (Van Leeuwen 2008).

These images produce disturbing feelings because they highlight how two groups that are in close contact are clearly not on the same social level. Mounir explains:

The immigrant becomes a robot and is transported to an alternative reality where, despite highly advanced technology, the basic problem of integration remains. Real connection between human being and android is impossible.



Photo 10. Piston splitter. Photo by Mounir Derbal, 2024.

The social criticism is very strong and refers to how Mounir sees his parents being treated, but also what he sees happening in his own generation:

The reality is shocking and dramatic. Immigrants in Italy are treated as labour, as robots who are at the service of Italians. These robots have no human identity, they have no human needs. And this dehumanisation, unfortunately, is being repeated with us, the young people of the second generation. We too are treated like robots, children of robots.



Photo 11. Piston splitter. Photo by Mounir Derbal, 2024.

Mounir's entry can be linked to Karim's, whose work I started the article with, and closes the circle of young migrants' photographic self-representations. Their works involve very different techniques and styles. Karim's style is reminiscent of classical portraiture and reportage; Mounir's is very experimental and both playful and devastating. Karim uses the style of portraiture to give faces and identities to young people who are often portrayed as an indistinct mass of stereotyped characteristics; he does this to establish their humanity, and that they are deserving of rights—first and foremost, the right to be legal Italian citizens. Mounir urges us to critically reflect on rights being stripped away and the depersonalisation of migrants, of both first generation and their descendants (Dal Lago 1999).

Final Remarks

The works produced by these young photographers with a migrant background challenge the dominant visual framing of them in Italian society. As noted, the media often portray these young people through a narrow lens, which can only move from extreme frames of deviant, threatening behaviour to the rarer frame of perfect and successful integration. The dominant media representations also often exoticise young migrants' experiences, depicting them clearly as "others" who eat strange foods and dress in strange clothes. When young migrants are visible, they are hyper-visible and portrayed as entirely different from their native-born peers. But for them the opposite of hyper-visible is just invisible. The representational strategies adopted in images of young migrants produce their symbolic distancing and symbolic disempowerment, as they are portrayed as "others" or as inferior.

These visibility boundaries in contemporary Italian society are both reflected and criticised in the entries in the *Sguardi Plurali* photography competition. Through their photographs, the contestants challenge and reconsider the dominant images that have been produced of them. They do this by adopting different visual strategies and highlighting various themes. They were collectors of archived images; they produced new images and they co-produced images with their subjects.

One of the most entrenched narratives is that the children of migration form a distinct group separate from the majority society and are inherently unfit for full

integration. This perspective has led to the creation of a flat, de-historicised image of them. In response, some photographers have sought to highlight the transnational ties that shape and enrich their identities. They have repurposed archival visual materials, such as photographs sent by parents to their children.

Another significant aspect is the dehumanisation of these young people that emerges in public portrayals. To counter this phenomenon, various photographers emphasise the social dimension of intergenerational relationships. For instance, historical photographs of the Somali diaspora are recontextualised within a discourse that connects the present to the past, linking young people's identity to the immigrant history of their parents. In this way, the new generation recalls a history of mobility and connects with it. Immigration and emigration coexist in many of the submitted works. There is a clear visual reference to both present and past experiences of migration, whether by the young people themselves or their parents or grandparents. In Oleksandra's work, her mother's immigration to Italy is contrasted with that of her neighbours' emigration from Italy. Danielle's work emphasises her own movement across borders.

The connections with their parents and their cultural heritage are not the only important factors. There is a prevalent depiction of the children of migration as being perpetually suspended between two cultures. In reality, young people from immigrant backgrounds possess multiple identity references scattered across various locations. The photo diary, with its representational style, effectively captures this multiplicity of influences. Transnationalism is not an alternative to rootedness but complementary to it. On the one hand, several submissions describe the transnational ties that shape the identities of young people with a migrant background. These include, for example, the letters between Oleksandra and her mother. On the other hand, many images emphasise the need to represent oneself as firmly rooted in one's new home, such as Karim's portraits of Milan neighbourhoods or Danielle's photographs of domestic interiors, along with the image of the swallows that symbolise her search for roots.

In dominant visual narratives, young people are often portrayed as eternal outsiders, which prevents them from asserting their rights to citizenship. This situation ignites a struggle for the recognition of their full citizenship, both socially and legally. The use of photographic portraiture, where the subject engages the viewer directly from a position of equality, is instrumental in this endeavour. In many of the contestants' projects, the photographers adopted representational strategies that, rather than distancing the viewers, allowed them to connect with the images, experiencing empathy or resonating emotionally with the people and places depicted. Photographers thus seek to reduce social distances and the sense of estrangement toward the subjects of their photographs (Camp 2017; Van Leeuwen 2008).

The children of migrants continue to be depicted as racialised bodies, fated to experience the "othering" that their parents faced and be prevented from being fully integrated into Italian society. The stereotype of migrants as merely a labour force is both reinforced and subverted through a visual language rich in irony. While this may

involve evident objectification and symbolic distancing, it also serves as a form of social critique.

All these elements bring to light the relationship between these young people and the concept of Italianness. As we have seen, this relationship is highly complex, as Italianness is a construct that young people from immigrant backgrounds sometimes embrace and adapt as their own, but other times reject, and occasionally completely overturn as a concept. These photographs make crystal clear that there is no monolithic community, as the term “second generation” might suggest; rather, a diverse array of individuals exists, and these hold varied identities, speak multiple languages and hold a range of political beliefs.

The Italian identity portrayed in these photographs takes on many shades. Some contestants assert their belonging by showcasing the places and monuments of their cities, as seen in Karim’s images of the outskirts of Milan. The message conveyed is clear: “We are here, and these are our spaces in our cities.” In other instances, a different Italianness is claimed by highlighting aesthetic elements and clothing that diverge from standardized representations. These images communicate: “We are fully Italian; we wear the hijab, we have dark skin,” etc.

Through irony, empathy and reflexivity—hallmarks of photographic language—these young artists have succeeded in deconstructing the representations as others who do not belong circulating in public discourse. They present counter-narratives that propose a re-evaluation of Italianness that rejects its narrow and exclusionary aspects.

The self-representations of these young photographers give them a voice that their representations in the dominant culture have denied them. They speak through the three properties of photographic language (Cabañes 2017): the indexical, the iconic and the symbolic. The indexical is particularly evident in the photographic works that aim to document the everyday life of these young people, such as Danielle’s photographic diary; the iconic property emerges in those works that refer to the collective condition as opposed to the individual condition, such as Karim’s portraits; and the symbolic property emerges through the photos that convey concepts, as in the case of Mounir’s robots or Oleksandra’s *Kolobok*.

Unlike the visual representations of immigrants in the dominant culture, which are often stereotypical and simplistic, these photographic projects offer a complex view of the identities and world views of young people. These photographers created self-representations through their own voices. From an ethnographic perspective, it is important to examine not only how these images were produced, but also how they circulated, were received, and ultimately, how they were appropriated and recontextualized (Troelenberg et al. 2020; Vivienne and Burgess 2013). I plan to undertake that research project in the near future.

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What (my) people think I do: New Italians and Transnational Imaginaries of Migrations in a TikTok Ethnography

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-176

Abstract

Social media, particularly TikTok, has become a key platform for the "New Italians" (the so-called "second generation"), young people of migrant descent who have achieved national and sometimes international success. They navigate the neoliberal economy, engaging in the "attention economy" and "visibility labor" (Abidin 2020). Despite their diverse video styles, these young people utilize social media to challenge migration stereotypes and critique exclusionary policies and the rhetoric of multiculturalism (Bachis 2023). While their content is rarely explicitly political, it reveals a "memetic dimension" of political expression (Lierat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019) and a "memefication" of intergenerational politics (Zeng and Abidin, 2021). The article focuses on a specific TikTok trend: the "What-people-think-I-do/What-I-really-do" video meme, juxtaposing stereotypical expectations with personal realities. These videos, aimed at relatives in migrants' countries of origin or the "homeland," reflect intergenerational relationships and cultural expectations in Italy. These videos create an irreverent discourse around social norms regarding migration through the use of irony, exaggeration, and the subversion of stereotypes. By crafting inside jokes that bridge generations, the meme reshapes imaginaries about migration and mobility in transnational social spaces.

Keywords

TikTok; New Italians; Memefication; Mobility; Transnational Imaginaries

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In the last decades¹, one of the most significant ways of expression for the 'New Italians,' the so-called 'second generation of migrants'², has been social media, especially social networks such as TikTok. These young people, who have grown up within transnational families, increasingly use social media to navigate and reshape their identities in the digital sphere. Many young people have built successful personal brands on platforms like TikTok, attracting national and even international followers. Their engagement with the platform exemplifies a novel form of 'integration,' not into traditional social structures but into the more complex and highly competitive neoliberal economy. Specifically, they participate in what has been defined, also in an anthropological way, as the "attention economy" (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021) and "visibility labor" (Abidin 2020), where personal branding, content creation, and digital visibility are the key currencies.

The New Italians, despite the wide stylistic diversity which only partially reflects their cultural origins and the multiple trajectories of migration and mobility, in the videos, create content that often carries deeply significant implications for how they construct and negotiate their identities. Their posts become places of "subjectivization," where they express themselves and reshape how society perceives their space within it. Many social media creators actively challenge and overturn prevalent stereotypes surrounding migration while critiquing broader political issues, such as exclusionary immigration policies and the limitations of multicultural rhetoric (Bachis Forthcoming). These video creators often question the political and cultural structures that perpetuate marginalization, though this critique rarely takes an overtly political form (Bachis 2023). Instead, their content reveals a "memetic dimension" of political expression, where humor, irony, and visual metaphors implicitly convey meanings (Lerat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019). This process, as some scholars argue (Zeng and Abidin, 2021), can be viewed as a form of "memefication" in intergenerational politics, where younger generations, particularly those with migrant backgrounds, use humor and online memes to reflect on and reframe their relationships with older generations and society at large.

Drawing on a netnography of New Italians on TikTok conducted online (Kozinets 2010), this paper analyzes these social media practices as a form of identity building and a means of claiming a 'subaltern voice' within public debate. It focuses on a specific pattern of video memes that have become popular on TikTok: the 'What-people-think-I-do/What-I-really-do' format. This meme initially started as a simple visual chart comparing popular assumptions about a particular activity. On TikTok, this pattern has evolved,

¹ This article builds from the research project *IM-Mobilities - Imagined Mediterranean Mobilities: An Inventory of Narratives in a Multimodal Perspective* (University of Cagliari), funded by the Fondazione di Sardegna, Call for Biennial Projects 2022.

² I use the expression "New Italians" in a provocative way to describe young people from migrant backgrounds. Rather than being viewed as a condition of denial (due to legal or political exclusion), the term highlights the tensions and challenges faced by this group regarding their "second generation condition" (Grimaldi 2022) and *italianità* (Bachis 2024), which are often subject to misrecognition and exclusion. Politically, this concept can contribute to challenging the national order of things (Malkki 1995) and promote the "de-migrantization" (Dahinden 2016) of the new generation, thereby separating them from the automatic inclusion into categories of difference based on ethnicity or migration background (Hui 2016). For a more extensive discussion, see (Bachis 2024)

moving beyond static images to dynamic video sequences, where a combination of video and text creates a more nuanced and often funny comparison. The new Italians sometimes use this video meme to challenge an exceptionalist approach to migration that is widespread in Italy and typically promoted by populist politicians. At other times – and this is what we will address in this article – they turn their gaze to relatives who have remained in their countries of origin and to the imaginaries they have developed about migrants (and families) in Europe.

Like “folklore”: taking seriously TikTok

Bucarest, Romania, 6 December 2024. Romania's Constitutional Court has invalidated the results of the first round of the presidential election just days before the scheduled second round. The decision follows the declassification of intelligence documents indicating foreign influence, possibly from Russia, which may have swayed the outcome. Calin Georgescu, who had primarily campaigned on TikTok, was accused of benefiting from this interference (Rainsford 2024). A few days later, the European Commission launched formal proceedings against TikTok over potential breaches of the Digital Services Act (Armangau 2024). These disputes have already been brought against TikTok also in Italy (EDPB 2022).

These disputes appear to be the latest case of a sort of 'TikTok-phobia': a persistent concern surrounding TikTok, encompassing potential political manipulation, concerns about data collection, and its ownership by a Chinese company. At the same time, analysts and academics accused TikTok of producing anxiety and depression (Sha and Dong 2021), generating an “excessive trivialization of political content” (Sapag M. et al. 2023:13), and, like social media in general (Engesser et al. 2017; Sandvoss 2019), to increasing political polarization and aiding the “strateg[ies] to down-play the most controversial issues of populist right” (González-Aguilar et al. 2023:237).

However, other studies consider the relationship between populism and TikTok more nuanced. Some scholars underline the use of TikTok as a tool for digital activism among young generations, for example, in Palestine (Abbas et al. 2022; Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022). Scholarships highlight how populist politicians, such as Matteo Salvini, who frequently appear in the mass media as a “skilled manipulator” of social media platforms (mainly TikTok), are “definitely not welcomed on TikTok” (Cervi and Tejedor 2023: 142). However, in this context, even the failure – or the structuring of a robust “anti-fandom” (Click 2019) – can contribute to making the communication of some politicians on social media more “penetrating.” In short, despite the presence of “elective affinities” between social media and populism, the link between populism and TikTok appears to be more a consequence of the spread of this social network in an era of crisis than a result of structural reasons in communication (Gerbaudo 2018).

In other words, at both an institutional and academic level, TikTok appears ‘the’ social network good for thinking about the crisis that Western democracies are facing. This attitude towards TikTok cannot be reduced to political distinctions (right/left, conservative/progressive...) but seems to be transversal. Suppose we assume the well-known categories that Umberto Eco (1964) has summarized as different attitudes toward

the mass media. In that case, TikTok is an easy target for both the 'apocalyptic' intellectuals who denounce its risks (like other social networks) and the 'integrated' ones, who, in any case, seem to have little interest in it.

As noted by Abidin (2020: 20), it is no coincidence that TikTok is the least ethnographically investigated social network by far. The main ethnographic approaches to this platform seem to remain restricted to some specific interests of researchers, such as the celebrity studies of Crystal Abidin (2018, 2020), an anthropologist who has also studied Instagram and who has developed research over the years on musical challenges (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022) and intergenerational relationships on TikTok (Zeng and Abidin 2021). Other scholars explored the possibilities of expanding the pedagogical horizons and collaborative research of TikTok (Liber et al. 2023), highlighting its potential in reconfiguring the relationships between teaching, learning, and research beyond and against hierarchical paradigms in a digital environment shaped by algorithms.

The ethnographic study of algorithms appears to be one of the most promising areas (Cerretani 2023; Rodgers and Lloyd-Evans 2021), starting from the "stories" that are built online around their functioning (Schellewald 2022), partly taking up the first embryonic proposals of ethnographic research 'with' and 'on' algorithms, understood as "part of broad patterns of meaning and practice that can be engaged with empirically" (Seaver 2017). Still, others attempt to decode the various forms of communication generated on the social network (Schellewald 2021). In this framework, the interaction between self-representation and the shaping power of algorithms has been read as producing an "algorithmized self" (Bhandari and Bimo 2022) in a context in which "the boundaries between user and platform are intentionally blurred; here more than ever do we see a restless machine, one with as much of a 'life' as its human user" (Bhandari and Bimo 2020). It is precisely from reflecting on the role of algorithms in content selection that a "curatorial" approach to anthropologists' work on TikTok has developed (Braun and Mateus 2024). The anthropologist becomes a visitor to an archive of the present, one that is constantly expanding and evolving. In this context, the anthropologist takes on a curatorial role, navigating and engaging with the vast array of content available" (Braun and Mateus 2024, 201).

From this point of view, the possibility for users to participate, consume, and create content makes them "proto-anthropologists":

In contrast to the practice of anthropologists asking their research participants to create videos of their personal experiences, individuals are now voluntarily making their videos and sharing them with a wider audience at a rapidly accelerating rate (Braun and Mateus 2024, 198).

Other works on TikTok study border on communication sciences and present research on political expression (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019) concerning the alt-right (Weimann and Masri 2023), on the compulsive nature of scrolling and being continuously connected in social media in general (Lupinacci 2021), or on the influence of the vertical framing mode on the visual experience of the subjects (Wang 2020). From a psychological point

of view, more than personality traits, it is the motivations of the users, especially the desire for self-representation, social interaction, and escape from everyday life, which represent elements of the orientation of the behavior (and success) of TikTok users (Omar and Dequan 2020).

In Italy, despite the growing development of digital ethnography (i.e., Biscaldi and Matera 2019, 2023; Pilotto 2023; Santanera 2022), only a few studies research on TikTok (Bachis 2023, 2024; Guerzoni and Toro Matuk 2022). In general, despite some attempts at methodology (Caliandro 2018; Beneito-Montagut 2021; Rodgers and Lloyd-Evans 2021) and ethics (Jackson 2023; Kara and Khoo 2023; Perrault and Keating 2018; Zeng et al., 2021; Zhao 2024), the ethnographic approach to TikTok still appears to lack a solid methodological debate.

In short, it seems that it is difficult for anthropologists to 'take TikTok seriously' compared to other social networks, and that affects not only the forms of communication but also the research fields.³ A sort of background noise appears to detract from the interest in this digital space for anthropologists (see Bachis, 2023). Paraphrasing a well-known quotation from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison notebooks*, TikTok "must not be conceived as an oddity, a strange or picturesque thing; rather, it must be regarded as something very serious and to be taken seriously (Gramsci 2021, 132)".

One way to take TikTok seriously is to ask who laughs with whom (and about what). Drawing on a vast anthropological literature (from Frederik Barth to Mary Douglas, as well as the African American Studies scholar Werner Sollors), a review essay by John Lowe (Lowe 1986) proposes the notion of a "community of laughter," emphasizing how this produces a sense of "we-ness." Although this sense is common to all forms of laughter, Lowe argues that the function of constructing belonging is more pronounced in contexts of subalternity and among so-called minorities, as explored through Jewish-American and Afro-American literature. In a certain way, this is also effective for the laughter of migrants. Perhaps the most direct way to question this "seriously funny" nature of TikTok production is to try to understand who young migrants laugh with, who they laugh at, and whether the laughing community is limited to migrants from specific countries of origin or concerns the New Italians more generally.

Making money in Europe

In recent years, TikTok has become the fastest-growing social network among younger generations (Cervi 2021). In November 2023, content creators who publish from Italy (or primarily in the Italian language) with more than 5 million followers were 41 (Mr. Keba 2023). Between these, 6 are New Italians. This number grows if considering all TikTokers with more than one million followers. Many of these produce an explicit or implicit anti-racist discourse. They often joke about skin color as a boundary marker between 'real' Italians and those who 'are not,' employing ironic strategies and surreal *détournements* (Bachis 2024).

³ An example of this is the case of anthropologist Daniel Miller retracting a post on TikTok that was perceived as excessively optimistic. See Bachis 2023; Miller 2022.

I started using TikTok in the summer of 2020. Unlike many anthropologists (Zhao 2024), the choice was not caused by the restrictions imposed in traditional field practice by COVID-19 pandemic confinement policies, but by almost random elements. Although I had already studied mobility and so-called "second generations" (Bachis 2015), I had never reflected on the role that TikTok plays in redefining the identity politics of young people experiencing the "second generation condition" (Grimaldi 2022). The interest was sparked in 2020 when, during another fieldwork, a social activist dealing with young migrants sent me a video that was circulating among his friends. The video showed a young black man explaining how he arrived in Europe by plane ("reality") and how people imagine he arrived, traveling as a boat people, having to swim in the sea, facing sharks and other hazards ("expectations") (@khabi.lame 2020). In the following years, Khabi Lame, a young man born in Dakar and raised in Italy, will become the most-followed TikToker worldwide, with 162 million followers as of December 2024. From that moment, I started using TikTok and interacting with users, letting the algorithm's rhythm guide me in selecting my contacts, commenting, and uploading short videos while keeping me away from overexposure to my content.⁴

Khaby Lame's video was not only the first one I saw but also the first of many based on the plot: "What the people think I do / What I really do." One of this pattern's most exciting aspects is describing and mocking relationships with relatives and parents. Some refer to parents' expectations (about marriage, school, and work), while others joke about the migratory expectations of relatives who stay in the country of origin. Many refer to the "easy money" in migration. However, while it is common sense to think that it is adults who push the younger ones to be thrifty, in this case, it is the younger generation that overturns this rhetoric against their older relatives in Africa. Of course, these are not videos posted only in Italy but instead produced by many other young people worldwide⁵ and part of the "memetic dimension" of political voicing (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019), although often implicit.

Sadiboujr, now on TikTok as @imsadibou, is an Afro-descendant boy with 180 thousand followers. In a video, he moves along a sidewalk wearing a Lakers uniform, a baseball cap with the visor backward, sunglasses, and a mask lowered under his chin (Figure 1).

⁴ As has been noted, "in today's more complex context of freely shared digital content " [...] the act of using user-generated content [...] without explicit permission may inadvertently infringe upon a creator's rights and autonomy over their creations" (Braun and Mateus 2024, 202). However, the exposure of content creators' videos in the dissemination of research results interacts with one of the main reasons for the use of the social network TikTok itself: to make their content as widespread as possible in a logic of "political economy of attention" (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021). This situation leads to a necessary redefinition, more fluid and relative, of ethical deliberations and "respect for creators." For these reasons, in this article, I limit the use of content not originating from "professional" TikTokers as much as possible, using exclusively public comments and content.

⁵ Among the many: in one video, @ltsdovine (2022), he gets money from a cutting board; in another one @legendarymood (2024), who comes from the Ivory Coast, dances and sings in lip sync on *Mavin* by Dorobucci, a popular song used on TikTok to point up a (wannabe) excellent economic and social condition: The caption reads "How African family sees when you study abroad."



Figure 1 "The way the family thinks we make money in Europe." Screenshot from @sadiboujr 2020.

While *Jerusalema* by the South African singer Nomcebo Zikode plays in the background, he collects 20-euro bills from the plants in a flowerpot. The caption reads, "The way the family thinks we make money in Europe." He openly quotes the expression, "Money doesn't grow on trees." This phrase is said to warn someone to be careful about how much money they spend, as there is only a limited amount (McIntosh 2013). Usually refers to the relationship between parents and children. Generally, it is an idiomatic expression that adults use, with an ironic register, to refuse requests to purchase goods from children or young people. A user comments below: "When moms say 'but does money grow on trees?'" Typically, the parents address this issue to the younger generation. In this video, Sadiboujr overturns the roles: a young man makes fun of his relatives who stay in their home country because they believe that in Europe, 'money grows on trees' (@sadiboujr 2020).

"Money doesn't grow on trees" is a standard plot on TikTok, also spread by music stars like Jason Derulo (@jasonderulo 2020) and wrestling champions like Ahawi Amal Imani (@imani_amal 2020). Sometimes, new Italians propose it in the "original" version, in which they joke about situations in which parents refuse to give money (@Ouz_the_best 2023). In other cases, the plot is the same, and the content creator collects money from plants, like @itsmaddalena, who, on the same music as Sadiboujr, collects 20 Euro bills from a plant. The caption reads, "How our families in Africa think we find money once we arrive in Europe" (@itsmaddalena74 2020, *Figure 2*). The comments agree and bring experiences from other countries: @Ariadnavega writes: "Even the family in Cuba thinks like this."

Similarly, @eriksson_prince, who comes from Benin, posted a video of himself in a square picking money from trees, with Bepi Philip's song *Comment ne pas te louer* playing in the background. The caption reads, "Here is what they think in Africa of us Africans living in Europe" (@eriksson_prince 2023, Figure 3).



Figure 2 "How our families in Africa think we find money once we arrive in Europe." Screenshot from @itsmaddalena74 2020.



Figure 3 "Here is what they think in Africa of us Africans living in Europe." Screenshot from @eriksson_prince 2023.

In other cases, some content creators associate the idea that money grows on trees with a generic African stereotype. Jalayahxoxo, a Nigerian girl, posts a video taken with a selfie stick. She touches her hair and lip-syncs to the song in the background. The caption reads: "One bad thing about being black is that our relatives in Africa call our parents to ask us to send money as if money grows on trees." (@jakayahxoxo 2024)

Content creators often describe the idea of making big money in Europe in a stereotypical way. Some settings are persistent and increase the comic charge of the videos, exaggerating the distance between a 'real' condition and the idea that relatives in the homeland have. Luxury objects, sumptuous homes, or dream holiday spots are common.

@matychon, an Afro-descendant girl who produces beauty content, posts a green screen video in which, behind her half-length image, in a selfie mode, images scroll by to the music of *A la Floie* by Francky Vincent. The caption reads, "Our relatives in Africa think that's how we live in Europe." In the background, images scroll by of a luxury suite, mountains of banknotes, swimming pools, and resorts. @faiza comments: "They always think that; they think we are billionaires." A 'real white Italian' remarks: "It's not that Europe is rich; you must work to get things in life." The reply of @aicha, a young Afro-descendant, is sarcastic: "Thanks, without you I would never have thought that to keep a house and have food you have to work...but hahaha" (@matychon 2020a). As we will see in other cases, users who reply with stereotypes about the 'privileged condition of migrants in Europe' are often dismissed with irony or ignored.

While some videos joke about the communication infrastructures of transnational migration and their impact on the daily lives of adolescents (i.e., the 'video-call obligation'), many others focus on the financial aspects and the expectations they generate in countries of origin. Mocking relationships connected to the circulation of money in the transnational field of different mobilities is one of the favorite targets of young TikTokers, particularly the Afro-descendants. Thus, it is always @matychon who makes fun of relationships that 'fade away' once money has been sent (@matychon, 2020b). She films herself in close-up while trying to make a phone call, and on the other end, the phone rings unanswered. The caption reads: "When you call your family in Africa after you have sent them money." Below is a second caption: "Maybe they will call you back next month when the money has run out. " Someone replies, "Don't worry, they will call you back when they have run out of money so you can send more." Another girl writes, "It's beautiful that when you send the code, they reply in two seconds then disappear. The whole world is the same. It's true".

Phone calls from relatives are often the object of scorn, even when they are more directly related to the request for money. Finding a job for a young New Italian seems ironically to expose oneself to the entry into the circulation of money from Europe to the countries of origin.

@Coveredinlayers [Sumi] is a young, veiled woman. She introduces herself on the TikTok profile with the words "Arab name and Italian accent." She frames herself as she answers the phone. She lip-syncs an English audio that is very popular on TikTok (50,000 videos use it). You can hear the ringtone, an annoyed sigh, and a voice in English: "Yes

Robert, what do you want? Money? Check? Card? My Soul?". The caption reads: "POV. When your family in Africa finds out that you also work now" (@coveredinlayers 2023). The video pokes fun at the economic gaps between countries. If the stereotypical idea of an Africa where everyone is poor is often the subject of ironic videos about Europeans, in this case, videos and comments make fun of the claim that it is relatives in Africa who pass themselves off as poor. A young woman coming from Morocco comments: "Alhhahaha, thank God I have a rich family in Morocco 😂." Sumi replies: "In theory, mine too, but you know free things attract everyone 😂." Another Afro-descendant girl, sarcastic, comments a little further on: "Or those richer than you and who live a thousand times better who think that just because you live in Europe, you are a millionaire 🤔🤔🤔." Sumi replies, "Those are the worst."

In other cases, which seem less widespread, the New Italians' journey to Africa represents the moment at which they test the relatives' imaginaries about migration. @Andyfaye is a Senegalese girl. She takes a half-length picture and lip-syncs *Nei giardini che nessuno sa* ("In the gardens that nobody knows") by the Italian singer Renato Zero, specifically the lines, "I would give you my eyes to see what you don't see." The caption reads: "When in Senegal, my aunts ask me to give them everything I have in my suitcase because "you can repurchase it, you Europeans have so much money" (@andyfaye 2023).

In the New Italian production, the centrality of money in establishing the difference between what "their people" think they do and what they actually do appears much more widespread. The horizon in which they joke about this difference between expectations and reality is not drawn only by the country of arrival. It is no coincidence that, in almost all the videos examined, the "rich" pole of the game of mirrors between expectation and reality is Europe, rather than a single country where young people were born, grew up, or immigrated. This results from the multi-layered biographical trajectories of young people, who are rarely fixed "between here and there." @willymcflash, for example, is a young man of Ivorian origin, living in France, born in Naples and raised in Bologna. At the end of June 2020, he published a video that was quite successful (66 thousand likes), but above all, it triggered a significant number of comments (@willymcflash 2020). He was filmed from the waist up, in green screen mode (Figure 4). The caption reads: "How my relatives in Africa think it's like to live in Europe." In the background, images of villas, luxury resorts, custom cars, planes, and the inevitable tree on which money grows scroll by. Willy makes a series of gestures to indicate his condition of wealth and happiness. In the background play *Soldi* ("Money") by the Italian singer Mahmood: "Tell me if you only thought about money, as if you had money." Willy lifts the collar of his shirt, smiles winkingly looking at the camera, and makes the gesture of taking money from the tree. Many young New Italians comment below: "I live in an apartment in Italy, but my relatives in Tunisia have villas with gardens and swimming pools, and they think I have much money: 😏." "Moroccans too 😂😂"; "it is true, Albanian also thinks the same thing"; "My Polish relatives be like"; "So, my parents in Brazil? 😂😂😂 I'm a billionaire"; "it's what my cousin in Morocco thinks 🤔🤔🤔."



Figure 4 "How my relatives in Africa think it's like to live in Europe." Screenshot from @wilymcflyash 2020.

A 'real Italian' writes: "In Italy, there is no work for us Italians, imagine for you." A flame war breaks out. Someone comments sarcastically: "Yes, yes, in fact, I see so many foreign doctors, engineers, or lawyers." Someone comments that foreigners find work because they are more available. "Available? But if they fired my father several times to make room for a black man", replies @kristian. The New Italians almost do not participate in the heated discussion. It is perhaps an awareness of one of the most enduring unwritten rules of the internet since its inception: "Don't feed the trolls." But it is probably also a reaction generated by another level of communication, a way of drawing boundaries between a community of laughers and others.

Conclusion

The brief review we have taken into account allows us to draw some conclusive notes on the three questions we examined: who young migrants laugh with, who they laugh at, and whether the laughing community is limited to migrants from specific countries of origin or concerns the New Italians more generally. The (prevalent) use of the Italian language creates a "community of laughers" that excludes relatives who stay in their home country. At the same time, this choice encompasses a broad spectrum of users who share (often, but not always) not only language skills but also the "second generation condition." This process outlines a transnational community of laughers excluded as 'not properly Italian' by anti-migrant rhetoric who identify themselves, beyond their origin, in the situations that are joked about. However, the discourse carried out by the New Italians is not addressed against those who refuse the deep transformations brought about by international mobility in Italy. In short, it is not explicitly an anti-racist discourse.

Nevertheless, the videos build one of the tools for constructing transnational meaning among young people in second generation condition and seem to have two primary

goals: joking about relatives living in their home country, and exploring forms of intergenerational memefication using humor and irony to address intergenerational tensions and expectations about life in Italy. The use of the Italian language, in this case, excludes relatives in the country of origin and includes those who are in the condition of second generation. In short, it operates within the context of migration and mobility rather than focusing on the opposition between migrants and natives. This video creates an inside joke that allows New Italians to negotiate their sense of belonging in a society that is often ambivalent toward them. Through their circulation, these media practices – particularly the use of irony, exaggeration, and subversion of stereotypes – produce an irreverent discourse around and inside mobility. New Italians producing these videos challenge social expectations about being a migrant or a 'New Italian.' At the same time, by crafting shared cultural references that reverberate across generations, these video memes become a tool for reimagining mobility and immobility in transnational spaces.

The centrality of money and success, reversed in the mockery of relatives, signals an ironic ability to navigate the neoliberal economy by engaging in the attention economy and visibility labor. This ability occurs both for those who have been successful on the social network and have made their activity as content creators a job and for those who cultivate, in a (more or less) hinted way, this hope.

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Watching Nasim's world: aesthetics, technology and subjectivity of digital labor

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-177

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between subjectivity, technology and aesthetics drawing on the case of Nasim, a youtuber of Iranian origin based in California who attacked employees and died at Google's headquarters in 2018. Nasim's self-produced videos provide an entry point to reflect on the encounters between the making of self and audiovisual technologies under current capitalist conditions. Analyzing the formal features of Nasim's videos and the labor they entail, the article reflects on the mutual imbrication of self-determination (autopoiesis) and techno-social articulations, to sketch the hypothesis that freedom and control far from being opposites are inextricably linked and define the conditions of a current mode of existence in which the expression of life results in death.

Keywords

Technology, subjectivity, aesthetics, labor, media, Iranian diaspora

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1. The circulation of images



Figure 1 Screen shot of Nasim's video titled "کوسه+گرسنه+و+دختر."

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%87+%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%87+%D9%88+%D8%AF%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B1.wmv

A young woman swims in an ocean of pixelated waves only delimited by the sky at the horizon, her slim figure at the center of the screen, almost three quarters out of the water. Speaking Persian, she says she enjoys swimming in such peaceful and transparent waters. It's an abstract world, not much more than colors and shapes, not unlike a basic animation or videogame. A shark appears, first the fins, not much more than blue triangles moving on the surface of the sea, then a cartoonlike enormous open mouth about to eat the woman. A conversation follows. The shark asks the woman to provide a logical reason not to eat her. "I am vegan" she says. "Why you did not say it from the start!" the shark replies swimming away. The video ends as it started, with the woman swimming across the saturated blue screen in a limitless ocean.

It was the contemporary relentless circulation of images in which we are all immersed that made me watch this video and learn about Nasim Aghdam. On April 3rd, 2018, the New York Times carried this news item on its front page:

A woman opened fire with a handgun at YouTube's headquarters in California on Tuesday afternoon, shooting three people – one of whom was critically injured – before killing herself, the authorities said. The San Bruno Police Department identified the attacker late Tuesday as Nasim Najafi Aghdam, who was in her late 30s. The motivation for the shootings was under investigation, the police said, although her social media postings included criticisms of YouTube¹.

Immediately after Nasim's death, her social media accounts were taken down, but some of her videos and screen shots circulated accompanying accounts of the events at YouTube headquarters, along with information on her life and analyses of the "anxiety of demonetization" (Chen 2018). Anxious as many other digital producers about her decline in revenue due to changes in YouTube policies on advertising and retribution per number of views, Nasim harmed others and herself. I learned about Nasim and her media production reading these news items, and started watching her 300 or so videos, many

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/03/us/youtube-shooting.html>

of them reposted on YouTube in subsequent years, many others hosted at archive.org along with chronological captures of her websites with her photos and writings ².

Watching Nasim's videos, I felt summoned into a strangely familiar yet unknown world in which habitual references were reconfigured on an unsettling terrain³. In Nasim's videos everyday settings and objects are reassembled into a circumscribed world made of saturated colors and fixed frames. In most videos Nasim stands at the center of the frame looking outward, straight towards the camera, swimming, working out, cooking, sewing, performing comedy acts, arguing for animal rights, engaging in social and political critique. At once serious and impossible to take seriously, Nasim's images produce estrangement and generate thinking, inviting one to reflect on the relationship between technology, aesthetics and subjectivity in times of digital labor.

Made mostly between 2010 and 2018 –before Covid, Tik-Tok and AI– Nasim's videos are a product of their time, already superseded by the innumerable images and events that followed, which have transformed the specific assemblage of technology, aesthetics and subjectivity that these videos actualized. And yet, because of their peculiarity, Nasim's videos are an original vantagepoint to reflect on the production of images in our epoch and analyze the relationship between the forms of expression made available by digital technologies and the processes of subject formation they enable. My analysis aims at bringing to the fore the contrast between on the one hand the image of self making and freedom the videos enact, what I term Nasim's world, and on the other hand the conditions of their production, determined by capital flows and labor conditions, which determine the very existence of Nasim's world, as well as the circulation of these images and my own practice of watching and researching the videos. However, rather than positing this contradiction as one between individual autonomy and techno-capitalist determination, between humans on one side and apparatus on the other, my discussion aims at showing how today the making of a self is instead indissociable from its technological forms in ways that trouble any neat partition between the two.

The circulation of Nasim's videos cannot be disjoined from her tragic death. However, I am not interested in using it to make sense of her videos retrospectively. The following pages do not draw on Nasim's life to explain her videos, nor do they draw on her videos to explain her actions. Avoiding search for causes, I discuss Nasim's videos as aesthetic products made out of the experiences and the labor of their author but not

² In all her video production Nasim does not use her last name, the one that was reported in the news and used in archive.org to attribute authorship but identifies herself either as Nasim or Nasim-e Sabz (see footnote 12). I refer to her as Nasim to underline both that my focus is on her videos (not her life) and that what I am analyzing is her own production as presented in her video world. I thank Samar Omid-Noubijari and Maryam Roosta for their invaluable research, and Chiara Pilotto and Bruno Riccio for their invitation to present this research at the University of Bologna workshop and their engaging conversations. Alessandra Gribaldo gave me immensely insightful comments. I also thank Lynda Dematteo, Rossen Djagalov, Philippe Messier and especially Mariella Pandolfo and Arvind Rajagopal for inviting me to present the research in their seminars and their precious feedback. The research of Samuele Collu and conversations with him have shaped my thinking. I thank the two generous anonymous reviewers for their incredibly insightful and concrete suggestions. The research was funded by an Insight Development Grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, I thank them for their support. I invite readers to watch Nasim's videos.

³ Many YouTube comments to Nasim's videos (written after her death) express similar reactions see for example user @Kloutkulture "Wow her videos were instantly classified as the weird side of youtube" or @yovanasalgado319 "She looks kinda creepy tho." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1Vi4YGMGkk>.

identical with or indexical of her life. My approach is twofold. On the one hand, I watch and analyze Nasim's videos on their own terms. Nasim aspired to be taken seriously as an artist and cultural critic. My analysis is an effort to understand her video production and examine their forms as artifacts. On the other hand, I describe the videos to reconstruct how their aesthetics, their assemblage of sensations and forms, produces a specific image of Nasim and her actions, what I call Nasim's world, which I argue can tell us something about the specific intersection of technology and subjectivity they express. In this regard, my own act of watching the videos (as that of other viewers) is also caught up in the relationship between technology and subjectivity that these images both elicit and express.

My choice to name her video production "Nasim's world" aims at drawing attention towards the existential dimension of her videos while also underlying both the artistic labor of their production and their distinctive self-contained character. Loosely phenomenological, the term "world" is also meant to underlie the set of intersecting and conflicting expressive trajectories that compose these images and come to constitute a specific form of relationality. Nasim's world is self-contained but not isolated from its surroundings. On the contrary, its composition draws on the milieu of the internet and other media and suburban American and Iranian lifestyles. All these elements however are displaced and reconfigured to delineate a world shaped by Nasim's technologically inflected creativity. This movement from the outside to the inside highlights both the severance of Nasim's world from and the closeness to its surroundings, and sets the stage for their defining underlying tension.

Nasim's videos constitute a world in which the tension between the will towards defining one's own life in one's own terms, what I refer to as the process of "making oneself," becomes inseparable from the set of economic and technological circumstances that both enable and constrain this process. While Nasim asserts over and over that she made everything herself, this tension is not (as it usually posited) a clash between the "internal" will of an "I" and the external circumstances that oppose its development because, as I will try to show, it is these very circumstances which enable the process of making oneself. In Nasim's world self-determination (autopoiesis) and other-determination (allopoiesis) converge⁴. Nasim's world is a technological world. Technology provides not just the tools but the architecture and the building blocks of this self-contained world which could not exist without it. The convergence of self-determination and other determination is also, inextricably, a question of labor. The quantity and diversity of activities one engages in to make a world such as Nasim's is directly proportional to the exchange value through which one expresses oneself. The degree of freedom one has and that allows them to be what they want corresponds (counterintuitively) to the degree to which one is subjected to the economic and technological dispositifs that enable such freedom. Nasim's world suggests that freedom and constraint, rather than opposite have become indistinguishable from each other. This is what makes Nasim's videos unsettling. Ultimately this indistinguishable kernel is related

⁴ My use of the term autopoiesis owes more to Guattari (1995) than the original formulation by Maturana and Varela (1980).

to the pulsional field of repressed tensions that animates singular existences in the contemporary world. It is here that one can find certainly not an answer but perhaps a better formulated question, a riddle, about the way in which such mode of existence turns the expression of life into annihilation.

Though this article does not do justice to the complexity of the Iranian diaspora nor to the scholarship on it, readers should keep in mind that Nasim's world is deeply intertwined with this culture, and more specifically with the politics of the Iranian diaspora's online activities, which bring together and set apart the place of residence and the distant but no less present Iranian homeland (e.g. Khosravi 2000, Zare 2018)⁵. In her study of *weblogestan*, the Persian language media sphere of blogs and other internet exchanges, Sima Shakhsari discusses Nasim's web persona in relation to the politics of sexuality and free speech that dominated this discursive field in United States during the 2010's (Shakhsari 2020: 135-144)⁶. For Shakhsari, Nasim is a "risky subject, an unruly Iranian immigrant that cannot be placed within categories. Neither queer nor heteronormative, neither perfect victim nor villain, Nasim's "para-humanity" is for Shakhsari a sign of her failed exceptionalism and affective queerness that challenges "the promise of freedom of speech and individualism." (Shakhsari 2020: 144).

Shakhsari's analysis is crucial to understand the dynamics of *weblogestan* and to delineate some of the context from which Nasim's world emerged. As I will elaborate further below, Shakhsari also draws a crucial connection between the activities of *weblogestan* and the necessary conditions of self-entrepreneurship upon which this media production is based. These pages however develop a different premise. Rather than analyzing how Nasim might be positioned in relation to the Persian language internet discursive field, or comment on her failures to do so, I aim at delineating Nasim videos' specific process of individuation that outlines a way of doing, "intrinsic" to the phenomenon itself⁷. While not denying that Nasim's world might very well be read as a performance of "humanity," especially considering Nasim's social critique that I will discuss below, what is at stake for me is less Nasim's message than what, referencing Foucault, Deleuze called an "intrinsic aesthetic" (Deleuze 2003: 321), a combinatory art of life that retools whatever it encounters into a thing of its own. Considering the combination of forms, techniques and forces assembled in the videos as expressive of a specific way of being, I reflect on what they can tell us about the conditions of possibility for one to become "someone" (Nasim in this case) in times of migration and digital economy. These conditions are themselves imbricated into the intrinsic aesthetic of Nasim's world, to the extent that the "mode of existence" I delineate is also at the same

⁵ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this point and the relevant bibliography.

⁶ On *weblogestan* see also Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) dated but still useful.

⁷ "A process of subjectification, that is, the production of a mode of existence, can't be equated with a subject, unless we divest the subject of any interiority and even any identity. Subjectification doesn't even have anything to do with a 'person': it's a specific or collective individuation relating to an event (a time of day, a river, a wind, a life. . .). It's a mode of intensity, not a personal subject." (Deleuze 1995: 98-99 Translation modified, see also Ibid: 113-116). Deleuze's use of the term "mode of existence" is related at least in part to Simondon's work on the mode of existence of technical objects and linked to the question of technology (Simondon 2017).

time “a mode of production” as Marx and Engels had already noted⁸. The production of images, value and subjectivity are part and parcel of the same process. Furthering Deleuze's perspective, already in 1992 Felix Guattari had charted the intersection of these trajectories reflecting on the increasing relevance of the combination of technology, aesthetics and subjectivity, especially in relation to the then emerging “reappropriation and singularisation of the use of media” (Guattari 1995: 5) which constitutes one of the premises of contemporary platform capitalism. These mediated singular expressions, enabled by digital technologies, constitute the axis of what Guattari called an emergent form of autopoiesis characterized by the possibility to invent or create new universes of reference (in our case Nasim's own world) while at the same time completely subsumed to the logic of capital's accumulation. This singularization of the media has reached nowadays such a level that it is hardly distinguishable from the making of subjectivity itself, having become its hallmark.

2. Nasim's media ecology



Figure 2 Screenshot from Nasim's website for August 26, 2016.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.html>

According to what she posted on one of her websites in 2016 (see Figure 2), and stated in her videos, Nasim was born in Iran in 1979 (the year of the Iranian revolution) in the city of Urmia in the northwest of the country, in the province of Azerbaijan⁹. She spent several years in Karaj, her “favorite” city, a urban sprawl about a hundred km from Tehran that

⁸ “This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce.” (Marx and Engels 1976: 31-32) Philological research has shown how the phrasing of this passage of the *German Ideology* is the outcome of editing by generations of editors rather than Marx and Engels' own formulation (see Carver, Blank and Marx 2014).

⁹ “About Nasim”, https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

developed in the 1980s and 90s at a time of rapid urbanization. She arrived in Southern California in the late nineties¹⁰.

On her websites and videos Nasim presented herself as a “vegan” and an activist for animals’ rights, condemning meat eaters while often also addressing the health benefits of a vegan diet. As evidenced by the screenshot in Figure 2, her veganism is also related to her interest in the body, in sports and dance. On her website, Nasim announces that in 2010 she produced the “first Persian Vegan TV commercial” and first “Persian Animal Rights Music Video” for a Persian language satellite channel in Los Angeles¹¹. She later became a YouTube creator also active on other social media (according to her archived website, besides several YouTube channels, Nasim had several Instagram profiles, Facebook, and a Telegram channel, which are now inaccessible). She spoke Turkish, in addition to Persian and English and she produced videos in all three languages. Her posts are often multilingual and she used several variations of her name on the internet¹². Nasim had a certain recognition on social media, mostly among Persian speakers, probably outside Iran¹³. As she explains in a video, she seems to also have attracted the attention of a Turkish speaking internet public: a Turkish youtuber who had posted and ridiculed some of her videos, made an apology after her death¹⁴.

In United States, in Southern California in particular, there is a large and ever-growing population of Iranians who have been migrating there since the 1979 revolution. In the 1980s a diverse Persian language media production developed in the Los Angeles area.

¹⁰ At the time of her death, some news outlets, including the New York Times, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/youtube-shooting-nasim-najafi-aghdam.html> reported that Nasim was a Bahai, a religion not recognized by the Islamic Republic of Iran whose followers are persecuted in Iran, indicating this as the reason for her migration (Shakhsari describes her as a “refugee”). In Nasim’s materials that I researched so far I found only one, but significant reference to the Bahai faith. A passage in Persian from one of the works of Bahahullah, the religion’s founder, superimposed on a photograph of Nasim was for at least one year (2017-18) at the top of Nasim’s webpage until early 2018 when it was moved at the bottom of the website, see here <https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.html>.

¹¹ “Nasim First Persian Vegan TV Ads”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Nasim+First+Persian+Vegan+TV+Ads.mp4 The music video was produced for Andisheh TV. “Nasim First Iranian Vegan Music Video Do you Dare”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Nasim+First+Iranian+Vegan+Music+Video+Do+You+Dare.mp4.

¹² One of them, Nasim-e Sabz (Green Nasim), along with her use of the color green (which is also related to the green screen) likely refers to the 2009 “green” movement of mass political protests in Iran which were repressed by the state. However, (so far) I found no video or other material by Nasim referencing the green movement.

¹³ According to screenshots of her cancelled YouTube accounts posted on her website captures on archive.org, Nasim had between 366,000 and 94,000 views for some of her videos, and 2/3M views of her channels. Also see the reactions to her death by other social media users quoted in Dagues (2018) who also argues she was well known. The extent to which Nasim was known in Iran is uncertain. The NYT states that some of her videos had gone “viral” in Iran, however, anecdotal evidence I was able to collect seems to indicate that she wasn’t known at all in Iran, or she received only some attention because of her death. As Dagues also implies part of her fame was due to the ways in which other social media users and personalities pointed out or ridiculed her videos and postures. The question of recognition and therefore of likes and views was Nasim’s own great concern: she accused YouTube of censoring or obscuring her videos so they would receive less views. Shakhsari (2020: 136) also argues that Nasim was well known in *weblogestan* and her views increased after she moved from producing parodies and sport training videos to recording responses to the people who were attacking her on social media.

¹⁴ “About Nasim,” https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4 referring to this video “ENTERESAN !!!! (Yeşil Nasim)”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ7hOjwZWBc&list=PLtV5Nng_bGXpx8HuED313V9lCfEbEaTO1a&index=16.

This happened in conjunction with the diffusion of satellite technologies that made long distance broadcasting and reception possible. Since the late 1980s, local TV channels broadcasting in Persian to the LA-Iranian community were also widely watched in Iran despite being prohibited by the Islamic Republic. Populated by many Iranian media personalities, actors and singers who had migrated to Southern California, the satellite TV channels also participated in producing what would eventually become a specific Iranian-American imaginary in which nostalgic views of Iranian modernism intertwined with American consumerism and voyeuristic excess (Nafisi 1993). Reality shows such as "Shahs of Sunset" can be seen as one of the outcomes of this process¹⁵. Music videos have been an important part of this media landscape (Hemmasi 2020). Nasim's video production is part of this specific media ecology. The settings, content, editing, and overall aesthetics of many of her videos recall Iranian satellite TV channels shows, and her "debut" in 2010 also marks her connection to that world. However, it seems she also took distance from the world of Iranian TVs, or perhaps she never really became a part of it. If Persian language satellite TVs and its attendant mediascape provided her with some of the formal elements of her videos, Nasim appropriated these forms towards a different use.

Equally uncertain is the extent to which Nasim's video production can be related to the transnational network of Iranian bloggers and social media users that developed in the 2010s. Shahkhsari sees Nasim as an integral part of this *weblogestan*, and certainly there are elements in her videos, speeches and websites that relate to this environment to which Nasim seems at times to respond, especially regarding "freedom", but the workings of *weblogestan*, as outlined by Shahkhsari, and its focus on political commentary do not fully account for Nasim's video production, even though Shahkhsari offers a crucial contextualization of the entrepreneurial character of these bloggers to which I return below.

Nasim's videos are also connected to the YouTube aesthetics of the 2010's. At the time, with the spread of smartphones and the development of platforms, there were trends – for example vaporwave (i.e. James Ferraro's music and videos, or "post-internet art" – whose aesthetics resembles Nasim's style: use of cheap design software, low fi production, background with solid colors. These are artists took images and videos from the internet and repurposed them in their own work assembling them to create art objects that provided a playful critique of the internet world while at the same time acquiring value in the art market. However, because of its popularity, post-internet art lost its quality of avantgarde and experimentation and became very repetitive. The influence was reciprocal. Post-internet art was based on internet pop culture, while at the same time pop artists copied or stole ideas from post-internet artists. Pop artists like Maryanna or Azelia Banks sold millions of copies taking some of the techniques and ideas for their videos from post-internet art (see Quaranta 2020). Nasim can be seen as part of this media environment. There are similarities between some of Nasim's videos and these pop/post-internet art productions. One can compare the video in Figure 1, with a 2012 Azelia Banks video in the "sea punk" genre of saturated colors¹⁶. In addition, several of Nasim's videos

¹⁵ "Shahs of Sunset: Season 2 Official Trailer | Bravo," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE22Dn27sVw>.

¹⁶ "ATLANTIS - AZELIA BANKS (**OFFICIAL VIDEO**)", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yj-xBpQ0CI0>.

are “parodies” of well-known pop singers as Taylor Swift. These similarities suggest that Nasim videos are very much part of a specific internet moment. And yet they are also quite estranged from it. They incorporate many elements of “post-internet art,” but their overall modality is far from this genre. Even when they are parodies, Nasim’s videos display a seriousness of intent that is far from the light playfulness of the post internet artists, while Nasim’s artisanal production is far from the professional videos of pop stars.

All these media products and their attendant trajectories come together to constitute the context out of which Nasim’s videos emerged. However, while Nasim videos are very much of their times, they are also outside of them. More than anything, Nasim’s videos stand out as something of their own.

3. Platform Capitalism

Today digital platforms are ubiquitous features of everyday life around the world, contributing to the making of contemporary capitalism and social relations more generally. Snircek draws attention to this phenomenon coining the term “platform capitalism” to identify the specificity of 2010s¹⁷. For him, after the crisis of 2008, a new business and technological model emerged. Developing trends already present that foregrounded knowledge as a key element of value production and therefore of labor, Snircek sees this new phase as characterized by data extraction (see also Mezzadra and Neilson 2019) as the new source of value. Data need an infrastructure to “sense, record, and analyze” (Snircek 2017: 54). The increase of digital communication met these demands and made digital platforms the key infrastructure of this new capitalist mode of production:

Often arising out of internal needs to handle data, platforms became an efficient way to monopolize, extract, analyze, and use the increasingly large amounts of data that were being recorded. Now [in 2017] this model has come to expand across the economy, as numerous companies incorporate platforms: powerful technology companies (Google, Facebook, and Amazon), dynamic start-ups (Uber, Airbnb), industrial leaders (GE, Siemens), and agricultural powerhouses (John Deere, Monsanto), to name just a few (Ibid: 57).

Platforms produce and accumulate exchange value through a complex set of operations of data extraction, via emotive reactions and behaviors like scrolling, surfing and retweeting. One can debate whether this value accumulation is the result of “free labor” as Tiziana Terranova (2000) had argued twenty-five years ago, or instead, as Snircek and others believe, if it primarily involves the extraction and appropriation of data (Snircek 2017: 70-1).

¹⁷ Snircek (2017) is a good overview of debates about internet and capitalism, but his distinction between data (information about what happened) and knowledge (information about why it happened) (Snircek 2017: 53) seems to introduce an unwarranted bifurcation between the what and the how of information, somehow taking the valorization of information as separate from the mode of production, a line of argumentation I disagree with.

Snircek defines platforms as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact” (Ibid: 57)¹⁸. Perhaps broad, Snircek’s definition has the merit of describing how production and communication are inextricably linked in contemporary capitalism. The very act of communication becomes an integral part of the value production process. Value in Marxian terms has always been connected to interaction (Rossi-Landi 2017), but platform capitalism valorizes communication itself to an unprecedented extent: there is no communication without valorization, communication coincides with exchange value¹⁹. Concurrently, in platform capitalism the difference between subjectivation and technology appears blurred. Humans are losing monopoly over language, while their affects and cognition have become integral component of technological devices. These developments also invite rethinking the division of labor in relation to technology. There are convergences and divergencies between the work accomplished by an algorithm and that accomplished by a digital worker, between machine labor and human labor²⁰. Research in black studies underlined how capitalism’s extraction is predicated on race (e.g. Robinson 2019) and questioned the humanist critique of technology as reproducing the racial divide (Wynter 2015). Others acknowledging these contributions, see “machine thinking” as potentially undermining the logic of capitalism (Parisi 2019). However, the question that Nasim’s videos pose is not to determine the extent to which the subsumption of communication to capital subjugates or liberates “humans,” nor even what does “human” mean, but to reflect on the mode of existence that such mechanization brings about. In other words, the effort is to move from a diagnostic about the process of valorization and its capture of language and affects, towards the description of an “intrinsic aesthetics” which cannot be explained solely by the dialectic between subsumption and liberation. What is the mode of existence of such assemblages born at the intersection of images and platform capitalism, what does Nasim’s world stand for? To begin to understand Nasim’s videos one still needs to take a closer look at the labor that made them possible.

4. Creative labor

In the 1970s, Joseph Beuys declared every person an artist (Antliff 2014: 5). With his statement, Beuys was contesting art’s institutions, art criticism and the art market by expanding a romantic notion of the artist to encompass humanity as a whole. Everyone can create art. There should not be any distinction between artist and spectator. The value of art is a conceit of the market. Beuys’ position was not without its contradictions at the time –if nothing else given the value of his own art works– but still retained a critical, liberatory potential.

However, by 2018, at the time of Nasim’s death, Beuys’ call for universal artistry had morphed into a description of a specific labor relation, and not necessarily a liberatory one. Rather than the expression of a shared humanity, creativity had become a necessary

¹⁸ Platforms “therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects.” (Ibid)

¹⁹ I thank Aurora Donzelli for discussing this issue with me and pointing me to the seminal work of Rossi Landi.

²⁰ See for example the case of Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Kassem 2023).

component of one's labor and therefore become integral to exchange value. Shahkhsari (2020: 169-194) discusses these precarious entrepreneurial conditions in relation to Persian language bloggers caught up in the economic gains of political expression wittingly or unwittingly complicit in the war on terror as knowledge producers who can only survive by monetizing their experience. In order to survive, creative workers have to put their cognitive capacities at the service of the platforms out of which they operate, making their selves integrally available to the process of valorization: to survive they have to become entrepreneurs of themselves (i.e. !Mediengruppe Bitnik et al... 2020). These laborers are not the creative class Florida (2002) wrote about, the reservoir of individuals in innovative sectors that ensures the expansion of capitalist relations. Instead, these workers signal the absorption of creativity into self-entrepreneurship: self-making as auto-production (see also for example Wilf 2014). Self-formation, creative expression, and valorization go hand in hand to the extent that they have become indistinguishable. Self-entrepreneurs are by default living precariously. Creativity generates value, which is alienated from its producers. Deleuze noted that the self, the process of individuation, was a "kind of surplus value: not every dispositif necessarily has it" (Deleuze 2006: 341). But nowadays the self is the only surplus value that's left to the artist.

At least since 2016, Nasim had been criticizing YouTube for "demonetizing" and "filtering" her videos. In 2018 the company revised the policies regulating the number of views needed to receive compensation via advertising²¹. According to Chen (2018) the crisis became known as "Adpocalypse." But Nasim also argued that YouTube was flagging her videos, labelling them in a way that made them less visible and therefore censoring her (more on this below). At the time, other animal activists were raising similar arguments: their videos denouncing the violence against animals were flagged for cruelty while hunting videos were not (the fact that these denunciatory videos are now on YouTube speaks to the complexity of the matter)²². Shahkhsari sees these dynamics as evidence that YouTube is an "arbiter of speech" (Shahkhsari 2020, 139). But the question at stake is also the inextricable intertwining of knowledge labor, politics and technology. Labeling and free speech are intertwined with machine labor. The norms of communication are already technical and enmeshed with value production marking the "merging of life and labor in the age of automation" as Domenico Quaranta describes it. (i.e. !Mediengruppe Bitnik et al... 2020).

The merger of life, labor and technology evidenced in the demonetizing and flagging of Nasim's videos points to the current conditions needed for aesthetic creations to come into existence, for creative labor to run its course. The term "conditions" might be misleading insofar as technology, labor and exchange value are not so much the external constraints that delimit the work of the artist as elements that are themselves part of the aesthetic that propels the making of videos, the modality that gives shape to acts of making we might call aesthetic. The available vocabulary to describe this modality of existence is still tentative, caught in between the tendency on one hand to recur to biology to describe the forces at play and on the other hand to resort to moralizing

²¹ <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/additional-changes-to-youtube-partner/>.

²² For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQYHqqu1ln0>.

condemnations ("structures of power") that explain little and generate only a sense of indignation. The vocabulary of subjectivity does not help much either, because, at least in contemporary usage, is inevitably bound to distinguish what pertains to the human and what pertains to the dispositif that models and orients the human (e.g. Agamben 2009, see Pasquinelli 2015 for a critique).

Tentatively, to describe current conditions of creative labor one could resort instead to the term "autopoiesis," which biologists Maturana and Varela used to describe the self-constitutive reproductive evolution of organisms and Felix Guattari appropriated to elaborate on the relationship between aesthetics technology and subjectivity²³. Guattari (1995) does not focus so much on the "auto" dimension of poeisis, which by default is defined in opposition to allopoeisis, but on the impossibility to separate out what pertains to individuals and what pertain to society, what pertains to aesthetics and what to technology. What matters is how the trajectories of aesthetics, technology and subjectivity assemble and what effect their associations generate. To understand how these trajectories intertwine in Nasim's videos I now turn to discussing some of their constitutive elements.

5. Nasim's world

Nasim's videos are "artisanal": made with care and effort, they are experiments with materials and forms. Everything is carefully thought. The quantity and variety of videos is a testimony to Nasim's systematic and sustained labor. In Nasim's craft, aesthetics, the combination of sensations and forms, intertwines with lines of subjectification, trajectories through which a certain self and its relations take shape. The videos instantiate the creative act of assembling a set of elements to express the ways in which a certain existential power to persevere folds into an assemblage of lights, objects, and sounds. These relations are technological, made possible by the affordances of the platform (in this case YouTube) but they also operate at an existential level: they delineate a way of being.

Nasim's style

In Nasim's videos, the camera is fixed most of the times, and always when Nasim is in the frame. When the camera is not fixed, it zooms in and out, often unsteady. Most videos seem to be shot in one take, but often there are abrupt cuts and rudimentary editing. In this regard, Nasim's videos are no different from millions of other videos produced and uploaded every day on YouTube and other platforms. Nevertheless, they are not random or haphazard. The videos bear the mark of careful craft, instantiating an investment that comes with sustained and repeated effort. This investment turns the fixed camera, the rough zooms and the abrupt cuts into elements of a style, a specific aesthetic, a signature. Nasim's style is the opposite of a purposeful Do It Yourself approach, the inverse of a studied carelessness. The cipher of Nasim's videos style is the tension between on one hand the assertion of the hard work that went into their production, and on the other hand

²³ See also Slater (2020) who offers a summary of the debates around autopoiesis, gesturing towards the tension between auto-production and "allo" production, between "closed" machines and "open" ones. Povinelli (2006)'s "autological" subject is a token of this configuration –I thank Jennifer Campbell for the discussion.

the limited (if considered by professional standards) results achieved. The staging of this tension between effort and results doubles its respective poles: it puts into relief the homemade and rough character of the videos while doubling the sense of the amount of labor, care and determination they required. Nasim's investment is diagrammed into the forms and colors of the videos.

The signature style of Nasim's videos repeats itself throughout a great variety of genres, which Nasim calls "programs" (*barnameh*) –a term used commonly in Persian to refer to a TV show– of which she is the host and sole protagonist. There are sports instructional videos, music and dance videos, news reels, commentaries on political and social issues, often around veganism and animal rights, sex and health education videos, cooking and sewing lessons, comedy, parody, satire, and videos in which Nasim talks about herself and her video production. All these "shows" make up a world onto itself, covering every aspect of modern suburban life. Often the same video exhibits several of these genres combined, see the parody of Taylor Swift video in Figure 3. Many of the videos' genres fall under the rubric of instructional videos and could be seen as variations of a will to teach, changing in settings and skills but not in overall format. While this is the case, the multiplication of activities –which might also be aimed at reaching different publics– also points to the division of labor: each genre/show a profession, each genre a different set of skills. At the same time, across the different genres, Nasim is endowed with the power to do everything, she is a master all trades, while being always herself, she becomes someone else in each video.



Figure 3 Screenshot from "Music Videoparaody Ingilisi Taylor".

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%DA%A9_%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%88_%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C_%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C_taylor.wmv

A Self-contained Space/time

Nasim's videos are located in and produce a space/time of their own. They are often set in an enclosed space that corresponds to the video frame. The space of many videos is partitioned in a background and a foreground by using chroma key compositing. The background is composed of fixed images, either photographs (forests, gardens, sunsets, animals) electronic images (geometrical figures and frames or designed landscapes), or solid colors (blue and green screens) –more rarely of moving images (videos of Nasim,

animal slaughtering, newsreels). At times, architectural elements (a door frame for example) appear on one side or the other of the screen. In the foreground there is Nasim, most often at the center of the screen, facing the camera. Videos without chroma key compositing, are set inside houses: in a kitchen, a bedroom, a basement with a pool table, or a courtyard with high walls. The videos follow the temporal arc of the food recipe, the comedy sketch, the song, the political pronouncement, or the body exercise. They rarely last more than two minutes, often less. The temporality of the videos is linear, but also indefinite because severed from any points of reference outside the frame. The videos could last a few moments or continue endlessly.

These spatial and temporal coordinates enclose a world of its own, constituted by the elements that compose it. The outside world is itemized, abstracted and relocated within the frame of the videos. This dislocation is not a complete resignification of the outside, but a movement that re-sizes elements of the outside world to compose them in a different assemblage: the videos' space/time reconfigures the visible in its own terms. Rooms, architectural elements, and furniture as well as electronic landscapes and props appear as décor of the self-contained time/space into which they have been folded. This effect is amplified by the familiarity of the transposed elements. When Nasim is not in the frame, often "found objects" like food or drinks occupy the scene: zooming in and out, the camera places them in a suspended temporality of their own. It's Nasim's world.



Figure 4 Screen shot from "Fruit Icecream Nasim"

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Fruit+Icecream+Nasim.mp4

The pulsional ground

Sexuality is the ground of this world. Nasim addresses sexuality in many of her videos, often playing with different gender identifications. Sexuality is at once celebrated, mocked, and warned against, it is both alluring and threatening. In one video Nasim lashes against Mariam Mohebbi a sexual therapist who had a program on one of the Iranian Satellite TVs airing out of United States, in another she discusses at length how to enlarge breasts in a natural way via exercise and food²⁴. In another she talks about sex

²⁴ فحشا فساد جنسی و مریم محبی

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%A7+%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%

and contraception²⁵. Some videos verge on eroticism, in others she critiques “naked women.” Nasim is particularly vehement against anal sex and its dangers. In one video she responds and ridicules viewers (either real or imagined) who had implied that she was “a trans,” and states that she is a heterosexual woman²⁶. In other videos she cross-dresses and impersonates sexualized characters. Some videos suggest a critique of patriarchy or at least family expectations about gender roles²⁷.

Neither simply a question of identity nor one of practices, sexuality in Nasim’s world is more connected to fantasy than to genitals. Though Nasim discusses sexual practices in several videos and uses the term “sex” both in English and Persian (*jens*), naming “sexuality” the sensuality permeating these videos is reductive, not fully acknowledging something both more encompassing and less literally defined. It might be far-fetched but interesting to note that Nasim’s investment against violence towards animals in numerous videos also exhibits a similar intensity to her discussion of sexuality, signaling a broader field of tensions that triggers Nasim’s reactions and points towards an unresolved tension, an enlarged and yet undisclosed field which is central to Nasim’s world, in a speculative mode one could call it the unconscious of the videos, the site of pulsional conflicts.

Laplanche calls this pulsional ground *le sexual*, to distinguish it from sexual activity and from what is constituted as “sexual” by adults²⁸. *Le sexual* for Laplanche is the site of repression, but also of the articulation of pleasure in relation to an unknown. While this field is related to sexual pulsion, it is not to be identified literally with sex, but instead refers in a much broader sense to the unknown but constitutive bundling of forces that inscribe external demands into the psyche. It is the field where autopoiesis encounters allopoiesis,

[AF+%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%DB%8C+%D9%88+%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85+%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A8%DB%8C.wmv](https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF+%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86+%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%DB%8C+%D9%88+%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85+%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A8%DB%8C.wmv)

روشهای طبیعی بزرگ کردن سینه

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF+%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86+%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86%D9%87.wmv

²⁵ خطرات سکس باسن

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA+%D8%B3%DA%A9%D8%B3+%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%86.mp4

²⁶ After Nasim’s death some alt right bloggers continued to argue that she was a trans (Shahkhsari 2020: 141).

“t_video5080147777963425814”, https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/t_video5080147777963425814.mp4.

²⁷ “funny fathers” https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/funny+fathers.mp4.

²⁸ “I believe that even these days infantile sexuality, strictly speaking, is what is most repugnant in the eyes of the adult. Even today ‘bad habits’ remain the most difficult thing for adults to accept. So it is a curious definition by opposition. By a sort of circular reasoning the sexual is condemned because it is sexual, or *sexual* because it is condemned. The *sexual* is the repressed, it is repressed because it is the *sexual*.” (Laplanche 2011 162-163). Laplanche’s words describe with precision Nasim’s videos’ circular attraction and revulsion towards sexuality. Bad (sexual) habits for Nasim are often “unhealthy” habits i.e. habits that damage one’s health. At the same time, the playfulness of some of these videos seem to also signal traces of curiosity and explorations which could be associated with a child’s attitude. The terrain is slippery because often the video’s “genre” (i.e. normative viewer’s perspective) is undetermined, and what’s being said becomes undecidable. See a video where Nasim chastises kissing as a practice that spreads microbes in someone’s mouth to others, and advices to keep a Ziplock bag in one’s pocket and put it on either one own’s face or lips as a protection when someone wants to kiss you instead of shaking hands. The video is unsettling because it is impossible to decide if the video is a set of serious instructions or a parody. The fact that it precedes the covid pandemic is itself worth reflecting on. “Healthy Kissing Tip Nasimesabz”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Healthy+Kissing+Tip+Nasimesabz.mp4.

where one trajectory is intrinsically related to the other. The self-enclosed space-time of Nasim's videos is delineated by and as *le sexual*. Outside unknown (and repressed) elements are reworked into a field of tension and unstable signification, both inviting and threatening. Not a once and for all delineated territory, but the processual acting out of elements that are repressed but nevertheless reinscribed in relation to an outside world from which Nasim's word is separated. The delineation of an intrinsic space/time enables *le sexual* to come forth, to be referred to. As a psychoanalyst, Laplanche sees *le sexual* as shaped mainly by the adult-parent/child relationship, but in the case of Nasim's videos one would be hard pressed not to also reflect on the social (migration), political (freedom of expression) and economic entailments of the pulsional tensions animating the repressed ground.

The body and its dresses

Nasim's body is often the site where *le sexual* is played out. Though Nasim's words are a relevant dimension of her videos, it is her body that expresses. The body is endowed with the power to delineate Nasim's world, the body stands, moves, declares. Body building and aerobics workouts, dances, postures either still or in motion (standing, sitting, or dancing) and many other movements define the space/time of the videos. Nasim's body is everywhere. Numerous videos focus on care of the body from makeup to abdominals to cooking/diet instructions to advice on the dangers of anal sex. But even in those videos where the body is not the main protagonist it is nevertheless foregrounded, the very pole of the entire composition. In a video where she explains how to turn a pair of woman's underwear into a sports bra, Nasim is shown wearing the bra and flexing her muscles²⁹. Her body occupies the self-enclosed space time of the videos as the sole and overwhelming presence that animates them. Either in movement or rest, Nasim's body traces the lines that mark this territory: the dialogue is between her body and the frame. The videos are her body's environment.

In the videos, Nasim impersonates different characters by wearing clothes and wigs appropriate to the character. Even when Nasim is not embodying a specific character, clothes and hairs are crucial elements of the set up: transformational elements that dress her body. Nasim appears in a variety of outfits and hair styles. She wears plastic breasts, wigs, long sleeves dresses with paillettes, sportwear. She cross dresses.

The different outfits are conduits for character impersonation. In some videos she appears as a young man, in others as a hypersexualized female. In many videos Nasim plays the same character from beginning to end, while in others she plays different characters who dialogue with each other across a split screen or in a temporal sequence. Some of these characters are plotted into comedy acts, for example in one of the videos Nasim portrays an Iranian "lady" with voluminous hairs, a see-through scarf and heavy make-up and an "American" with cowboy hat and mustaches (see also Shakhshari 2020: 141) or in others she plays "fathers" or "grandmothers"³⁰. In these instances, dressed in

²⁹"t_video5186284112134013065"https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/t_video5186284112134013065.mp4.

³⁰"iranian [sic] vs americans" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/iranian+vs+americans.mp4.

character, speaking and moving in accordance with the projected habits of these impersonations, Nasim's body acts out the visible but refracted traces of *le sexual*, the unknowable field of tension that structures this self-contained world, the characters impersonating different, often conflicting trajectories of making oneself into someone.

The gaze

Nasim's gaze seals her world. In most videos Nasim looks directly into the camera, looking at her viewers looking at her, looking at herself looking at the viewers. If *le sexual* is the ground territory of the videos, Nasim's gaze is the perspective that delineates the force field that constitutes this ground. Viewers watch Nasim watching the video watching Nasim. Nasim's figure at the center of the videos, and her gaze at the center of her face, multiply the sense of self-containment of these productions. Nasim's gaze organizes the way in which the different elements of the videos are placed in relation to each other. However, there is no recognition, if one understands by this term the mutual constitution of self and other. Nasim's gaze is not addressed to anyone in particular. Though she often speaks to viewers directly ("you") there is no sense that the addressee is a viewing public from which recognition is sought (despite her fight for increased views), no more than a sense that the gaze defines by refraction a "self" and its intentionality. Rather, the gaze delimits a world, a force field occupied by different, at times conflicting trajectories. In this sense the gaze is also a point of fugue, a point of no return that continues to multiply. It is an autopoietic process that is predicated not on "self-reproduction" per se but on the black hole into which the energy produced and emitted is made to escape ad libitum. Having outlined the technological and the economic conditions of the videos, and examined some of their formal features, I turn now to discuss their process of making oneself.

6. Making oneself

Across videos and in some of Nasim's writings and images on her website, self-making is often highlighted. In one of her videos Nasim states that she makes everything in the videos herself, except the music (she sings atop preset melodies)³¹. Besides the biographical info in Figure 2, and a few videos about herself (notably the one about her sexuality), she does not discuss her life, but when she does, she emphasizes self-making in relation to a somewhat hostile environment. The Bahai prayer on her website is an invocation to the prophet of this religion to resist blame and isolation³². The theme of endurance in a hostile environment looms large.

Shahkhsari (2020: 136) argues that Nasim made videos about herself in response to viewers' comments about her, which either made fun of her or questioned her appearance and sexual orientation. This is certainly the case, and these responses constitute part of the looping process whereby the world I am trying to describe takes shape via the "communication" that digital platforms afford. But the emphasis on self-making goes beyond these responses. Nasim's descriptions of herself stress that she had

³¹ "About Nasim" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

³²In the prayer the prophet is named "gentle breeze" (*nasim-e sabah*) –possibly a reference to Nasim's own name.

been self-determined and independent since an early age. For example, she discusses her choice of becoming a vegetarian when she was five years old stating that she did it "out of my own desire. I had no guide and everyone was against it" she states underlying the sentence with her moving hands for emphasis³³. The self-contained space time of the videos reinforces the emphasis on her self-making as do the many videos in which something Nasim has made –a dress, a necklace, a plate of food– is placed at the center of the frame. The video themselves are both her products and evidence of her production³⁴.

Autarchy is a widespread characteristic of YouTube producers and creative laborers of the internet economy and aesthetics. These are self-made worlds. Nasim's self-making and entrepreneurship focus on the making itself rather than on the production of *herself*. The videos highlight how she did everything on her own, but the attention is directed towards the objects of production, not towards the self-constitution of her distinctive subjectivity. There is no self-fashioning. Instead, the emphasis is on *making* oneself. With words and actions, but also with the forms, settings and space/time configurations I outlined above, Nasim's videos point towards a process of autopoiesis, a production of oneself with one's own means, an intrinsic aesthetic. The outward is included as trace of a repressed force field which remains unknown and unknowable. In Nasim's world the distinction between use value and exchange value becomes uncertain. Not so much because of a presumed utilitarian imperative –Nasim makes videos to support herself economically– but because in the videos' mode of existence the production of oneself is indistinguishable from its valorization.

7. Critique



Figure 5 Screen shot from "The Star People"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z36TW-lt-R0&list=PLtV5Nng_bGXpx8HuED313V9lcFbEaTO1a&index=12.

³³ "About Nasim" https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/About+Nasim.mp4.

³⁴ Shahksari (2020: 138) without endorsing the comment, notes Nasim's "narcissism" and "her exaggerated sense of self-importance."

In a video titled “The Star People” (Figure 5) Nasim explains that she has finally understood that she comes from the stars and lists the characteristics of people like her:

They have strong magnetism, are sensitive to sound and light, are very creative; they feel different from other people, they have piercing eyes, they have a hard time expressing emotions [...] they have a problem with the system and try to change it. They are lonely and social life is difficult for them. Others have a hard time understanding their opinion and for this reason they are often ridiculed. Honesty is very important for them [...] They have depressing or suicidal thoughts...they communicate with a superior world [...]

The video ends with Nasim asking: “Do you also come from the stars?” The anthropological view from afar is here deployed to elaborate a social typology, describe nonconformity and search for kindred spirits. As Shahksari (2020: 139) argues, Nasim’s videos are a form of critique. Across the different genres of videos that Nasim produced critical themes recur. First, the vegan question. Some videos denounce animal killings, others warn against eating meat, some offer advice on vegan lifestyles and give vegan recipes, others are comedy acts with animals speaking and denouncing the way humans treat them (Figure 1). Videos also criticize advertising, “big business,” and conspicuous consumption. Some videos engage in political commentary. In one video Nasim compares freedom in Iran and freedom in US. In Iran there is no freedom, Nasim says, while in U.S.A. they make us believe that there is total freedom, freedom of expression however: “they make us say what we want, but there is censorship through algorithm.” (see also Shahksari 2020: 139). In another video titled “Islamic Republic,” (Ibid.) Nasim offers a critique of hypocrisy, drawing parallels between Iran and the US. As Shakhari discusses, these sarcastic remarks destabilize easy assumptions.

Many of Nasim’s videos and posts criticize YouTube and explain how she was censored: the company put descriptors and hashtags on her videos filtering them as not to be included among recommended videos. The real meaning of “freedom of speech” in Western countries Nasim argues is that one can voice their critique of the system in videos, but then videos are filtered, negatively tagged or taken down³⁵. This kind of filtering, Nasim argues, led to a substantial decrease in views and therefore in the money she received from advertising. As Nasim’s relatives told media outlets, these actions by YouTube caused her rage, and made her drive 800km, go to YouTube headquarters, wound three employees, and kill herself.

³⁵“Real Meaning of Freedom of Speech”

https://archive.org/details/Nasim_Aghdam/videos/Real+Meaning+Of+Free+Speech.mp4

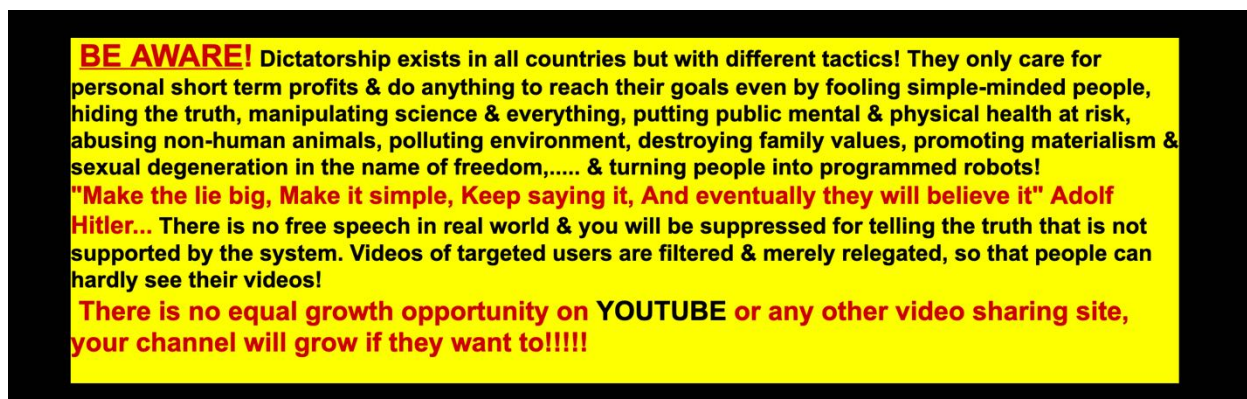


Figure 6 Screenshot from Nasim's website.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160829054016/http://nasimesabz.com/index.htm>

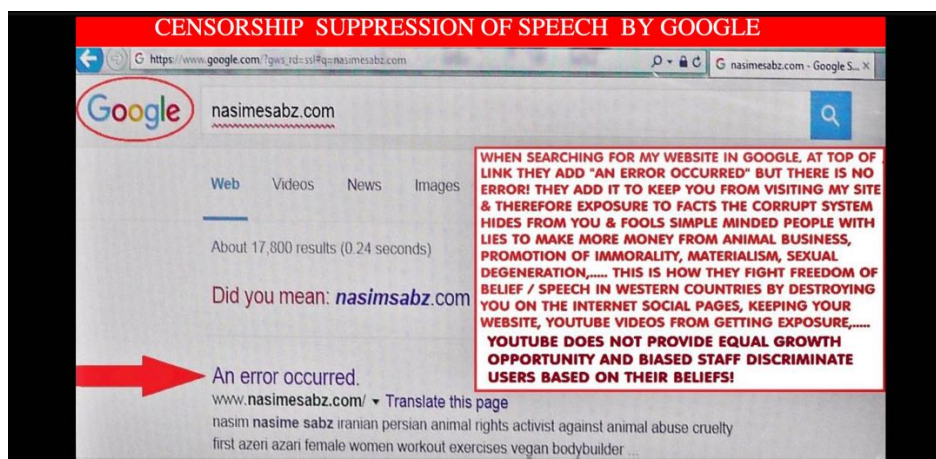


Figure 7 Screenshot from Nasim's website.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160916011632/http://www.nasimesabz.com/Censored.html>

8. Nasim's riddle

Nasim swims in a desolate, endless and self contained ocean. I have shown how Nasim's world encapsulates a contradiction between its self-made character and the technological and economic forms that make it possible. While Nasim shows over and over again that she is the maker of her world as both producer and sole protagonist of her videos, and exercises her critique on a variety of topics, going as far as questioning their valorization, the mode of existence of her world is determined by current economic and technological forms to the extent that her freedom is enabled by their constraints.

The aesthetics of Nasim's world are predicated on data extraction and self-entrepreneurship. This neoliberal model of creative labor along with the different technological affordances that delineate it (from the camera to the production software and the platform) is the skein that envelops the intrinsic aesthetic of the mode of the existence I delineated. This intrinsic aesthetic however is not, as immanent oriented perspectives sometime tend to argue, an endless fountain of life affirming enunciations.

If Nasim's videos celebrate her "self making," their production is imbricated in the forces that control her expression. Autopoiesis should not be confused with celebration. As I have tried to show, at the center of Nasim's world is a zone of indistinction where existential and economic conditions intertwine to the extent that it is impossible to set them apart. This pulsional ground constituted as that which is repressed, and therefore unknowable, impinges on the resulting aesthetic, animating the unsettling familiarity that attracts viewers to these videos.

A passage on the division of labor in *The German Ideology* haunts Nasim's world:

Therefore as soon as the division of labor starts to develop, each man has a particular, exclusive area of activity that constrains him, that he cannot get out of; he is a hunter, fisherman or herdsman or critic & must remain as such unless he wants to lose the means to live -whereas in communist society, where each man does not have an exclusive area of activity, but can rather develop himself in any branch he likes, society regulates the general production & thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, in the morning to hunt, in the afternoon to fish, in the evening to herd livestock and to criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter{,} fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx in Carver and Blank and Marx 2014: 89-91)

The intrinsic aesthetic of Nasim's world expresses a mode of existence where she can be a bodybuilder in the morning and a cook in the afternoon, a sex psychologist in the evening and a critic after dinner, without ever becoming one. But the autarchy of this world, its freedom, coincides with the conditions of its control. The more the videos work to expand their self-contained universe the more they get caught up in the existentially exploitative circle of value and communication. More freedom, more control. The more Nasim's world expresses life in all its mutating forms and activities, the more it might result in death. This is its riddle.

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Still bodies in traveling images: anthropological reflections on ambiguous postcards from ArgentinaVOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-178**Abstract**

Well before the digital age of today, when images have specific characteristics in terms of intangibility, immediacy, pervasiveness and diffusion, postcards constituted visual messages that portrayed something in the long-distance conversation between people in different parts of the world. This paper critically investigates the ambiguity of postcards depicting indigenous subjects in Argentina, which traveled to Europe and were produced from photographs that show native peoples mostly as 'docile' and exotic bodies, immobilized at a time of irreversible transformations in their way of life. In fact, the photographs were taken between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a historical moment when the geographical and identity definition of nation-state was formed through military campaigns, which aimed at the extermination or domination of native groups present on national territories. Paradoxically, photography visibilizes subjects at the moment of their physical or symbolic invisibilization.

Photography is an inherently mobile medium: by its very nature it changes context; as it migrates, its meaning changes along with its functions. In this sense, what kind of historical memory do these images evoke and what role do they play within the complex construction of 'exported' national identity? What is the role of these 'traveling' images in the formation of knowledge related to indigenous societies in the permanent tension between the shown and hidden, the near and far?

This paper is based on ongoing research that combines archival ethnography with fieldwork and conceives of the digital as a space in which images can be put back into circulation, shared and discussed, also with source communities.

Keywords

Postcards; indigenous people; plantation; visuality; Gran Chaco; Argentina.

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The power of the still photograph lies in its spatio-temporal dislocation of nature and the consequent decontextualization of those that exist within it, arrested in the flow of life and experience and transposed to other contexts. (Edwards 1996: 200)

Photography's capacities to fix a moving subject in space and time and to disseminate images and ideas have, for over a century, made it a powerful tool through which to reflect on human migration and (im)mobility. (Sheehan 2018:4)

Moving images between materiality and immateriality

The paper presents the results of an ongoing anthropological study on image repertoires depicting native subjects of Latin America, particularly from two border regions to the north and south of Argentina: the Gran Chaco and Tierra del Fuego.¹ By intertwining ethnographic experience with the study of photographic corpora preserved in both physical and digital archives, the aim of this investigation is to question these images, considering them as 'visual territories' that can be explored on various levels and dimensions. Historically, photographs of native societies are valuable for their testimonial nature, much like other sources for the reconstruction and study of the past. From the perspective of their materiality, however, they express a density that requires a close and informed gaze, as well as an interpretation that is as critical, dialogical, and reflective as possible.

I began this research in 2020, during the pandemic, when, unable to go into the field, I delved into various digital archives, open source and subscription, belonging to public and private institutions, particularly those of some European museums and

¹ Research in these two regions of Argentina has developed at different times and through different methodologies: alongside the long-term ethnographic study conducted in the Gran Chaco from 2009 to 2022, primarily funded by the South American Mercosur Ethnological Mission, a new research project began in April 2024 in the Isla Grande of Tierra del Fuego. This research is part of the project titled "Italian Ethnographic Museums with Non-European Collections Facing the Decolonial Challenge: Digitization as a Tool for Sharing and Co-Constructing Knowledge", funded by PNRR funds as part of the project "CHANGES - Cultural Heritage Active Innovation for Next-Gen Sustainable Society". In this article, I will focus exclusively on a repertoire of images related to the Gran Chaco.

I would like to express my gratitude to Bruno Riccio and Chiara Pilotto, for generously including my contribution in the special issue they curated, entitled "Moving images across borders: visual and digital resonances of human (im)mobilities". I also thank the anonymous reviewers for the kind comments that helped me improve it, and for the less gentle ones, which reminded me that the anthropological journey through the images is still a long one. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my colleague Davide Domenici, who took the time to read and comment on my text.

missionary archives that have digitized parts of their collections, and now partially accessible (though not always easily) online. During these digital searches, I came across several series of postcards frequently and ambiguously referred to as ‘ethnographic’ depicting native societies from the late 19th to the early 20th century. I quickly realized that I had likely underestimated the value of careful observation of the available material online; often focusing on the photographs, I had carelessly overlooked the postcards, considering them merely as ‘copies’ of the original photos I intended to study.

I later came to understand that it was precisely the social life of these reproductions that was highly revealing. On the one hand, they unveil the irrefutable testimonial value of photography, which Barthes (1980) summarized with ‘this has been’ and undeniably has been so. On the other, their ambiguity pushes us to ask: what do (don’t) we see when we look at these illustrated postcards? If we turn them over, what do we find on the back? What do those apparently trivial objects reveal that no other medium can convey?

A methodological clarification is necessary here. The study of the visual heritage related to the native societies currently present in Argentina is made difficult by its fragmentary nature, distributed across private collections, physical and digital archives located in Latin America and Europe, all with different management systems, negotiations, and specific authorization requests (Priamo 2012). Digital archives might appear to be an exception but, even in this case, open access is not always synonymous with accessibility and ease of use. The problem does not only concern researchers but also, and especially, the communities of origin, due to socio-economic disadvantages that result in unequal access to education, technology, and the Internet.²

From my point of view, it would have been very difficult to interrogate the images, and in this specific case the postcards, in their heterogeneity, without an extended study and previous fieldwork experience. What we can see in an image and its many layers of interpretation become meaningful starting from what we do not see, what is excluded, hidden, or concealed in the image but which we can intuit and consider based on stories we have been told, what we have studied, and understood through fieldwork. As John Berger wrote about photographic images: “The formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator knowledge of them prior to his seeing the photograph” (1967:19). It may seem obvious, but without prior work in the Chaco region, I probably would not have known how to read those images or would have only considered the most iconic ones, overlooking the rest.

With the intention of broadening the perspective, I continued my research in informal circuits, particularly those related to collecting, where I traced postcards that had traveled to Europe and bore the marks of correspondence between physically distant people. The postcards I studied are numerous and heterogeneous, and can be

² I had proof of this during several research experiences in the Chaco, when I shared digital copies of photographs from digitized archives available online, which had been unknown to the people involved until that moment. I reflected on this experience in a recent contribution (Scardozzi 2024), where I discuss the practice known as “photo-elicitation”, used in fieldwork both to collect information through images—viewed and discussed together with the participants—and to share knowledge of history and collective memory by showing what is preserved in European archives.

categorized by period, theme, style, subject, and, in the case of those that traveled, by origin and destination, publisher, and, more rarely, by author, as many are anonymous. The ones I analyze here traveled from Argentina to Europe in the early 20th century and differ in formal, content, and biographical aspects. Upon examining them, however, I realized that what they have in common is that they were produced from photographs taken from the late 19th century on the sugarcane plantations in northern Argentina, where indigenous laborers were employed seasonally in semi-slavery conditions. I will relate them to other images from the Archivo General de la Nación (Argentina), the Museo de La Plata (Argentina), and the Musée Quai Branly (France), to analyze the characteristics of the postcards that remain hidden and that blend in with other graphic elements. I will investigate the apparent 'humility'³ of these visual objects in motion between continents, overlooked precisely because of their omnipresence and their seemingly ephemeral nature (Edwards 1996). In this regard, Sandra Ferguson's words seem particularly significant when reflecting on the academic prejudice that long contributed to the exclusion of postcards for being considered a poor source for research: "the postcard is an incredible chameleon: it can function as a documentary image, correspondence, a lithographic or photographic print, advertisement or ephemera. Furthermore, in any particular instance, it can function as any or all of these documentary forms simultaneously" (Ferguson 2005: 168).

The meaning of the images will be shown to be therefore multifaceted and, if observed with the proper attention, images can stimulate various reflections on photography as an ontologically mobile medium (Andriotis, Mavrič 2013); on the use and dissemination of photographic images; on the relationship between text and images; on the subjects depicted and, of course, on the relationship between the photographer and the photographed, thus touching on the politics of representation. The analysis of the constitutive elements of the postcards can therefore be thought of as a kind of process of disaggregation and reaggregation, informed by fieldwork and a multidisciplinary perspective that, much like in an archaeological dig, reveals the different attributes—explicit or silenced—that make up the images. To use a visual metaphor, it is as if we were using different lenses to focus on different elements that, once reassembled, give us the final - though always partial vision of the object. Of course, it must be kept in mind that the meaning of an image is never univocal or given once and for all, but changes depending on the observer, context, and historical period.

This is even more true for images that were once conveyed through postcards, which traveled between the public and private spheres, changing in value, use, function, place, and meaning. This is "because like all images in the public sphere, meaning is free-floating, operating several possible closures of meaning within a single image as it is bought, consumed and sent, eliciting different readings in different contexts" (Edwards 1996: 213).

³ Here, I refer to the concept of the "humility of objects" developed by the anthropologist Daniel Miller, who argues that the power of objects lies in their ability to naturalize to the point where we forget about their existence. Precisely because they become familiar, some objects are taken for granted, and it is by becoming invisible and at the same time blindingly obvious that they exert their agency and shape our behaviors (Miller 2009).

Following the inspiring idea of Kopytoff (1986) regarding the cultural biography of objects and their process of singularization and commodification, I suggest considering postcards as a specific phase in the social life of certain photographs. These images begin as latent images on a medium (first glass plates, then film), are developed using chemical reagents, printed, copied, sold, mass-produced, disseminated, bought, exchanged, inherited, hidden, lost, destroyed, or, as in this case, re-circulated and today sold on websites and in online auctions. This back-and-forth between materiality and immateriality brings us back to the intrinsically migratory nature of the photographic image. Although in contemporary times the mobility of images from one digital environment to another has reached speeds and immediacy previously unthinkable, thanks also to their dematerialization—just think of the millions of images shared on social media, and among them, those that become ‘viral’ in just seconds through millions of ‘clicks’—images have always crossed geographical and socio-cultural borders, moving from one part of the world to another, albeit at a much slower pace and in very different ways than today.

Long before the digital era and the advent of social media, postcards—understood as a combination of texts and images—were the predecessors of our contemporary messaging systems, in which images are an essential component. Just think of how many photos we send and receive daily. It used to be the postcard that made images travel on a massive scale globally. Among these, mixed in with landscapes, monuments, ‘cultural typicalities’ and various oddities, were also those related to native societies of Latin America, produced from photographic events that were diversely structured but still characterized by a relationship of subordination between the photographer and the subject being photographed.

Sensitive content

Illustrated postcards, especially those that have traveled,⁴ are consumer objects with unpredictable life cycles; reconstructing their history and tracing their provenance is often impossible. In my analysis, I found it useful to examine both the object—the illustrated postcard—and its genealogy, trying to understand which ‘family of images’ each belongs to and how they relate to or contrast with one another. I thus attempted to shift from viewing the photograph as the final stage of an action—in this case, the illustrated postcard—to the photographic event as the starting point: the encounter between photographers and subjects on the sugarcane plantations in northern Argentina. I imagine this encounter and the living conditions on the sugarcane fields also through the voices of people I met during my fieldwork in the Pilcomayo region.⁵

⁴ In the context of collecting, they are specifically referred to as “travelled postcards”. These are postcards that have passed through the postal system, bearing stamps and postmarks, and are usually valued for the history and personal connections they carry, reflecting their journey and the interactions between the sender and the recipient.

⁵ Although other authors have analysed the production and circulation of illustrated postcards in South America (cf. Onken 2014, 2015, Teixidor Cadenas 2023), specifically in Argentina (Masotta 2003, 2011) also offering anthropological analysis bringing together highly heterogeneous materials (cf. Edwards 1996), in my opinion this aspect is crucial because in this case they are unified by a concealed and unacknowledged situation: labor on the plantation. They ‘come back to life’ only when connected to the voices that speak about it.

When Ariella Azoulay writes about the political ontology of photography, she states that photography is an event, and that the encounter with the photo-object continues the photographic event that occurred elsewhere (Azoulay 2015:67) and adds:

The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed, whether the participants are present by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked or as a consequence of deceit. Many of these traces are neither planned nor are they the result of an act of will. That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words, is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretations that have become attached to it. Even when these traces express cultural and social hierarchies that organize the power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person, they never simply echo such relations nor do they necessarily reflect the point of view of the most powerful figure present in the arena at the time the photograph was captured. This characteristic differentiates the photograph from all other forms of documentation that we know, and renders it a powerful and suggestive source for understanding the political existence of human beings, as well as for investigating their history.

All the illustrated postcards I will show originate from colonial situations in a post-colonial state and carry dominant viewpoints. The majority of photographic images depicting native peoples in the Argentine territory date back to the last decades of the 19th century. This was a time when military campaigns carried out by the Argentine state (1878-1885) in the Pampas, Patagonia, and Chaco regions led to the three-fold territorial expansion from north to south, through the extermination, expulsion, and subjugation of the heterogeneous native population that inhabited these areas. Following the military campaigns known as the *Conquista del Desierto* (Conquest of the Desert), native societies were annexed to the modern nation-state through military and religious dispositive, but also incorporated into various forms of capitalist agro-industrial production and the plantation economy in the northern provinces. The programmatic extermination operations⁶ or reduction of native societies into conditions of semi-slavery, were part of policies aimed at reconfiguring the country both territorially and identitarily. This would come through the annexation of new territories still under indigenous control, and operations of *blanqueamiento*⁷ (whitening) planned through the simultaneous opening of the country to European immigration, aimed at the 'ethnic' replacement of the local population⁸.

⁶ The analysis of the hostility and violence of the Argentine state towards indigenous societies has led some Argentine authors to speak of genocidal policies (see Delrio et al. 2010, Trinchero 2006).

⁷ *Blanqueamiento* refers to a specific nation-building project aimed at "whitening" the indigenous population existing prior to Spanish colonization, as well as Afro-descendants and "mestizos" present in Argentine territory at the time. For a deeper understanding of the notions of *blanqueamiento*, purity, and *mestizaje* in the Argentine context, see Briones (2002).

⁸ European immigration had already begun in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is mentioned in Article 25 of the National Constitution of 1853, which stated: "The Federal Government shall promote European immigration; and it shall not be able to restrict, limit, or impose any taxes on the entry into Argentine territory of foreigners whose purpose is to work the land, improve industries, and introduce and teach sciences and arts". For a systematic discussion of the history of immigration in Argentina, reference is made to the important work of Ferdinando Devoto (2003).

In this historical moment of profound change, photography reached the native populations of northern and southern Argentina, ‘freezing’ them in photographs produced more or less consciously and for different purposes by soldiers, travelers, missionaries, government officials, scientists—including anthropologists—and commercial photographers. The official production of images naturally makes the conflict invisible (Giordano 2011) and depicts ‘docile and miniaturized bodies’ (Masotta 2003), creating a visual repertoire that serves a discourse which is simultaneously universalist, classificatory, and racializing (Masotta 2011), also supported by the studies of physical anthropology that employed anthropometry, which I will address later.

These are undoubtedly ‘sensitive materials’, and I wondered for a long time whether it was worth showing these illustrated postcards, whether it was correct to publish them, and whether it was possible to circulate them again without running the risk of participating in the exposure of nonconsenting subjects, reproducing, under altered conditions, the gaze that had produced them. Despite being public messages, they should also be considered “sensitive content” for the individuals involved in the communication, whose names are displayed?

The provisional conclusion I have reached is that images are inherently risky. Acknowledging their intrinsic ambiguity as a starting point means having an opportunity to try to understand them and make them resonate differently. Potentially, it would make it possible to narrate stories that have yet to come to light and offer new interpretations, perhaps beginning with the curious gaze of someone among the million or so people who today in Argentina identify as descendants or members of *pueblos originarios* (indigenous peoples)⁹, or of people in Europe who recognize in the displayed images traces of their own existence or that of their ancestors.

This idea became even more convincing when, while conducting research in the digital archive of the Ibero-American Institute in Berlin, I came across a series of photographs that could not be viewed because they were covered by the image I present below, which is typically used as a warning rather than as a replacement of the image itself:

⁹ According to data from the 2022 Census, 1,306,730 million people in Argentina identify as indigenous or descendants of indigenous peoples (INDEC 2024).



Figure 1 Sensitive content.

I asked myself, when something is hidden in a (digital) archive, from whom is it being concealed? Which eyes must not see it? Who could be offended viewing the image? And, above all, for whom are the hidden contents sensitive? What untold stories might the images we cannot see tell?

I do not believe there is a universal rule that can be applied to all case studies regarding images with specific histories and subjects, but I think that we must look at these postcards precisely to allow ourselves to be disturbed and even scandalized by their paradoxical, sadistic, and sometimes grotesque staging, for what they explicitly say and for what they selectively or unconsciously conceal. I also decided to show them in the 9x14 postcard format to ensure the reader experiences the original image-object size.

Undoubtedly, these are clearly colonial records, but this is only one of the possible levels of interpretation. They are symbols of the economic success of a region, souvenirs of the propaganda of a nation that sought to present itself as civilized and progressive, tangible evidence of the real possibility of 'domesticating and civilizing' the savage indigenous peoples, visual messages traveling between worlds, items from private collections, pieces of European material culture from the early 20th century, museum objects, historical sources, and testimonies of indigenous resistance.

The work of the images, the images of the work

Starting from 1870, the *ingenios azucareros*, the sugar mills in northern Argentina, began to modernize with the introduction of steam-powered machinery for crushing sugar cane, transforming the mills into full-fledged agro-industrial complexes that followed the factory-plantation model.¹⁰ The territorial control of the *ingenios* expanded over vast areas of recently conquered land, and the size of these estates was so large that they were referred to as 'States within the State' (Lagos 1993), with effective systems for controlling circulation and communication routes, aimed at creating a domesticated and controlled

¹⁰ For a historical overview, reference is made to the work of Campi, Moyano, Teruel (2017).

socio-productive space. This production model was not exclusive to Argentina but was part of a capitalist expansion cycle that drastically and irreversibly altered the landscape of vast indigenous territories in South America, effectively turning them into zones designated for agricultural production.¹¹ The *ingenios* became places where different migratory paths intersected: thousands of people from various groups, including Wichí/Wheenayek,¹² Toba, Pilagá, Chorote, and Chiriguano from various regions of the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco, and later Kolla from the Andean region, made seasonal migrations to work on the plantations. There, they were employed primarily for the *zafra*, the grueling labor of sugar cane harvesting. The indigenous workforce also included natives who had been enslaved during military campaigns in southern Argentina and forcibly brought to the north. As Argentine anthropologist Diana Lenton argued, regarding the *Conquista del Desierto* in the south, in the regions: "The 'Conquista del Desierto' did not end with the military occupation of indigenous territories; instead, it was closely connected to the plantation economy of the northern provinces, which became the privileged destiny of the peoples defeated by the advance of the army and capital, and which constituted a possible model for regional economics" (Lenton, 2010:59, my translation).

Indeed, the indigenous labor force became the main 'engine' of the factories in Ledesma and La Esperanza (Jujuy province) and San Martín de Tabacal (Salta province) at least until the mechanization of the harvest, which began in the 1960s (Teruel 2005). Migration from the Chaco region primarily occurred during the winter, when forest resources were scarce. It is worth noting that entire households migrated seasonally to work on the plantations. Men, women and children of all ages populated the camps (see, for example, fig.2). Some children were born within the space of the *ingenio*, as Daniel Mananses tells me in a conversation during my fieldwork: "Mi abuela nació en el ingenio La Esperanza, nació allá. De ahí nace el nombre de ella 'Esperanzai' le decían, porque era del ingenio La Esperanza".¹³

The collective memory of the long migrations and the hard work in the *ingenio* was still vivid among the elderly people I met in the early years of my research along the Pilcomayo River.¹⁴ Some of them worked for a few years in the *ingenio*, like Sixto, a spiritual leader from San Luis indigenous community, who worked in San Martín de Tabacal for seven years:

¹¹ Starting from the mid-19th century, there were indeed similar experiences in the so-called "lowlands" of the South American continent, such as rubber extraction in the Bolivian and Peruvian Amazon, as well as wood and tannin extraction in both the Argentine and Paraguayan Chaco (Cordoba, Bossert, Richard 2015).

¹² In the following pages, reference to this group is made through the use of the exonym *Mataco*, which appears both on illustrated postcards and in classical anthropological literature up until the 1990s (cf. Alvarsson 1988; Braunstein 1990; Métraux 1956). It has since fallen into disuse due to its derogatory and discriminatory connotations.

¹³ "My grandmother was born in the La Esperanza sugar mill, she was born there. That's where her name comes from - 'Esperanzai' - people called her that because she was from La Esperanza mill". Daniel Mananses, Comunidad Indígena La Puntana (2011).

¹⁴ Most of them have passed away in recent years, and I feel extremely honored to have had the opportunity to converse with them several times during my research. All the conversations reported refer to 2011.

Venía un contratista¹⁵ de Tabacal, del Ingenio San Martín, y cada año lleva gente al ingenio y no tenemos documento nada, nada! Ahí recién hemos conocido calzados, pantalones, camisa. [...] Estábamos muy sufridos, pero hemos ganado mucha ropa. ¡Hemos cortado postes, cosechado cañas, un montón de trabajo!

¿Como les pagaban? ¿Con ropa? ¿O con plata?

Si, con plata. Pero poquito. Cada mes daban más o menos 5 pesos nomas, pero valía mucho la plata. ¡Vos sabes que trabajábamos un día entero, 15 centavos... 15 centavos! Si uno no terminaba esta tarea, no iba a cobrar nada. ¡Espera mañana! Recién le da una boleta. ¡Que sufrimiento! (Sixto Barrozo, Comunidad Indígena San Luis, 2011).¹⁶

The narratives regarding labor on the plantations, passed down from generation to generation, ranged from the dangers of the long migrations on foot,¹⁷ to the suffering caused by the hard labor and poor living conditions, and the great novelty of the material goods received at the end of the season: firearms, clothing, various tools, previously unknown foods, *los vicios* (the vices -alcohol, coca leaves, cigarettes), which were things from the 'white world' that would enter definitively into the material culture of various groups.¹⁸ A major testimony of the ambivalent memories associated with life in sugar mills was expressed by Laureano Segovia, the first Wichí historian, during a conversation that we had in the village of Misión La Paz, on the banks of the Pilcomayo River:

La gente empezó a conocer la mercadería de los criollos¹⁹ en el tiempo de ingenio. Entonces el ingenio azucarero ocupaba gente de acá en Chaco y los llevaba allá para hacerlos trabajar. Recién la gente conoce el trabajo, entonces el patrón azucarero los paga jornal. La gente no conocía la ropa como tenemos ahora, nada. Las mujeres cuando llegan al ingenio el patrón le daban ropa a la gente, camisa, antes no usaban pantalón. El ingeniero sabe que ellos no usan pantalón, le daba corte de tela, para envolver, como antes decían "chiripa", esto usaban. Entonces la gente ahí

¹⁵ According to the Argentinian anthropologist Gastón Gordillo, who worked on the memory of the *ingenios* with some Toba groups from western Formosa province, as early as 1890 the sugar mills began sending recruiters (*contratistas*) to the Pilcomayo region. These were indigenous men, also known as "Indian hunters", who travelled through the area announcing that people could earn weapons, horses and clothing on the *ingenio* (Gordillo 2005: 50-51).

¹⁶ "A contractor from Tabacal, from the San Martín sugar mill, would come every year and take people to the mill. We didn't have any documents, nothing, nothing! That's where we first got to know shoes, pants and shirts. [...] We suffered a lot, but we earned a lot of clothes. We cut posts, harvested sugarcane, so much work! / *How did they pay you? With clothes or with money?* / Yes, with money. But very little. Each month, they gave us about 5 pesos, but money was worth a lot back then. You know, we worked an entire day for 15 cents... 15 cents! If you didn't finish the task, you wouldn't get paid at all! Wait until tomorrow! Only then would they give you a receipt. What suffering!" (Sixto Barrozo, San Luis indigenous community, 2011, my translation).

¹⁷ The journey to reach the *ingenio* was made on foot and could last up to two months, during which people were exposed to all kinds of dangers. Among others, a tragically emblematic case was the massacre of Nuevo Mundo (Salta) in 1902, when around 130 Wichí men, women, and children, returning from the Ledesma sugar mill, were killed by the Argentine army.

¹⁸ For a discussion of material culture among Wichí groups, see Montani (2015).

¹⁹ For the use of the term *criollo* by the indigenous communities currently present in the Pilcomayo Salteño region, see Scardozzi (2020).

aprende a vestir, aprende a comer la comida de los criollos, hasta el día de hoy. (Laureano Segovia, Misión La Paz, 2011).²⁰

Although it is not explicit, among the evidence indicating that the images on the postcards were taken in the sugar mills were precisely the subjects dressed in European-style clothing -garments they acquired while working in the *ingenios* - and posed in front of huts made from the leftover leaves of sugarcane processing (Fig. 3-4; 10-11).

In Segovia's first book (2005), he collected stories of local memory from people belonging to different communities in the area, and one of these stories, transcribed in *wichí lhamntes* (the Wichí language) and translated into Spanish, was told by David Mananses (Daniel's father), a prominent leader from Pozo El Mulato, who provides a detailed account of the plantation experience:

Cuentan que el trabajo era muy duro, lo hacían hasta las 5 de la tarde, entonces median los surcos, que tenían que tener 40 cm. de profundidad, 25 cm. de ancho por 100 metros de largo, entonces les pagaba con vales. Al que tocaba una parte con piedras, la tarea no le resultaba fácil y les hacían repetir el trabajo hasta que quedaba bien. Después de 8 meses terminaron el trabajo, las mujeres ya habían sembrado la caña, entonces el dueño criollo les pagó. Alguna gente sacó 45 pesos por los 8 meses. La gente no conocía la caña, no sabían que de ella se obtenía el azúcar. Tampoco había tractores ni fábricas. También les pagaron con escopetas calibre 16, revólver y ropa, caramañola, olla de hierro y aquellas mujeres que trabajaban mucho recibían ropa. [...] La gente regresó cuando terminó el trabajo [...]. Al año siguiente la gente regresó al ingenio Ledesma, porque allí se conseguía trabajo. (David Mananses, in Segovia 2005:55)²¹

Being contracted annually as 'unskilled workers' within the hierarchy of the factories meant that the indigenous groups from the Chaco region had to perform the hardest and lowest paid tasks, often in precarious living conditions. According to various sources, this led to extremely high mortality rates among the makeshift camps that sprang up around the *ingenios azucareros* at the beginning of the 20th century (Gordillo 2006). Considered solely as a labor force, controlled and sedentarized, the indigenous people of northern Argentina were spared the programmatic extermination, as it was considered

²⁰ "People began to learn about the goods brought by the *criollos* during the time of the sugar mills. Back then, the sugar mill would recruit people from here in the Chaco and take them over there to work. That's when people first came to know what work was - The sugar mill owner would pay them a daily wage. People didn't know about clothing like we have today, nothing. When the women arrived at the mill, the owner would give them clothes - shirts; they didn't wear pants back then. The engineer knew they didn't wear pants, so he gave them cloth to wrap around themselves, which they used to call *chiripà*, that's what they wore. So, it was there that people learned how to dress, and how to eat *criollo* food, up to this day" (Laureano Segovia, Misión La Paz, 2011).

²¹ "People say the work was very hard. They did it until five in the afternoon, then they measured the furrows, which had to be 40 centimetres deep, 25 centimetres wide, and 100 meters long. Then they were paid with vouchers. Whoever had to work on a section with stones found the task not easy, and they made the, redo the work until it was done properly. After 8 months, the work was completed, and the women had already planted the sugarcane, so the Creole owner paid them. Some people earned 45 pesos for the 8 months. The people didn't know about sugarcane, they didn't know that sugar was obtained from it. There were no tractors or factories either. They were also paid with 16 gauge shotguns, revolvers, clothes, canteens, and iron pots, and the women who worked the hardest received clothing. [...] People returned when the work was finished [...]. The following year, people returned to the Ledesma sugar mill because that's where they could find work" (David Mananses in Segovia 2005:55, my translation).

economically unfeasible (Lagos 2002).²² Despite this, they were victims of various forms of violence, exploitation, and repression. In a conversation that took place in 2013, Asencio Pérez, a younger *cacique* of the indigenous community Alto de La Sierra, told me:

Hemos sido esclavizados; si hablamos de ingenios yo hoy en día se bien el mal trato que nos han hecho. ¡Hasta han inventado un “familiar” que era mentira!²³ Indígena que reclamaba, ahí nomás lo mataban. ¡Hasta eso! [...] En los ingenios nos han tratado así, nos han matado, ¡mucho gente se ha muerto! ¡Chicos! Muchas familias la han dejadas muerta ahí...y esta es la verdad y yo creo que todos saben. (Asencio Pérez, Comunidad Indígena Alto de La Sierra, 2013).²⁴

We do not know whether everyone was or is aware of it, as Asencio argues. Undoubtedly, for some, the situation was not only broadly accepted and tolerated but also considered beneficial from both an economic and scientific perspective.

In fact, the controlled space of the *ingenios* also became a point of contact between indigenous people and those who wanted to photograph and study them, allowing them to approach the ‘savages’ in a protected and safe space. As Argentine anthropologist Carlos Masotta, one of the first researchers to take an interest in postcards produced in Argentina, stated: “Photographing Indigenous people in those sugar mills was common as the exploitative, concentration camp-like context made it easier to access Indigenous individuals who posed docilely. These places were regularly used by photographers from the postal company until 1940” (Masotta 2011:13, my translation). The newly constructed railway made travel less complex, and photographers could easily reach their subjects in these establishments, having them available in exchange for a small amount of money or through the pressures of those supervising the labor on the plantations, which had an internal police system. It was on these occasions that, for

²² In contrast to the indigenous populations of southern Argentina, in the Chaco, the State appeared to act differently, avoiding extermination for purely economic reasons. As Lagos (2002) states: “The State acted with discretion in the Chaco not for humanitarian reasons, but out of strict economic convenience: a dead Indian is of no use as labor [...] In this sense, it is important to clarify the differences with the case of the country’s south, where what was considered the “real Indian problem” was located. Here, indigenous people were not seen as potential workers in the expansion of crop and livestock farming, and where, ultimately, violence unfolded without restraint” (Lagos 2002: 102, my translation).

²³ *El Familiar* – the Familiar – was a non-human mythological figure instrumental in maintaining control over the workers in the sugar mills. He belongs to the factory owner and guarantees him material prosperity in exchange for the sacrifice of human lives (cfr. Gordillo 2002, 2006; Isla 2000). The name suggest that the origin of the myth can be traced back to medieval Europe, when the term *familiar* was used to refer to supernatural and diabolical creatures that accompanied witches. In the context of sugar cane plantation, different social groups have represented it in various ways, frequently as a giant black dog with red eyes, a huge serpent or a shapeshifting creature. For Kirsten Mahlke (2022) the contractual myth re-emerges during the period of mass European immigration from the late 19th century onwards, in the newly industrialized regions of Argentina. On the topic of the Devil’s pact, the culture of terror, power relations and commodities fetishism in the Colombian plantations and in Bolivian mines, see Taussig (1980).

²⁴ “We were enslaved; if we talk about the sugar mills, I know very well today the mistreatment they inflicted on us. They even invented a “Familiar” that was a lie! Any indigenous person who protested was killed right then and there. Even that! [...] In the sugar mill, they treated us like that; they killed us, so many people died! Children! Many families were left dead there...and this is the truth, and I believe everyone knows it” (Asencio Pérez, Alto de La Sierra indigenous community, 2013, my translation).

example, most of the portraits of indigenous women, often naked or semi-naked, were taken—these later became postcards halfway between the exotic and the erotic genres. The photos were taken anonymously and produced in postcard format with suggestive captions (almost always ‘Bellezas Indias’), reflecting a gaze in which voyeurism, machismo, and racism fused, multiplying violence through serial reproduction that would reach the farthest parts of the world.²⁵

As previously mentioned, the plantations also became laboratories for scientific research. One of the most well-known examples in which photography and anthropology came together for scientific purposes is the study by Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, a German anthropologist who arrived in Argentina in 1897, contracted by the Museum of Natural Sciences in La Plata,²⁶ where he became head of the Anthropology section. In 1906, he conducted a scientific expedition to the sugar mill La Esperanza (Jujuy) together with Carlos Bruch, an entomologist and the photographic record keeper of the research (Fig. 2, 3, 4).



Figure 2 Photo by Carlos Bruch, Indigenous camp at Ingenio La Esperanza (Jujuy), 1906. Museo de La Plata (Argentina).

²⁵ I have chosen not to show this type of images in this article because the sensitivity of the topic deserves a specific treatment.

²⁶ Before returning to Germany, Lehmann-Nitsche would remain in Argentina until 1930, making many trips to what was referred as *el interior* (the hinterland) of the country, to differentiate it from the large cities. His goal was to study, from the perspective of physical anthropology, the different indigenous groups present in the national territory, which had been created relatively recently. However, he was also interested in cultural aspects, cosmogony, languages, and the mythology of various groups in the North and South of the country.

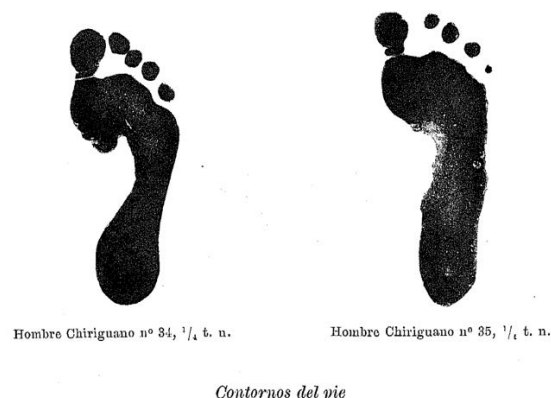


Figures 3 and 4 Photos by Carlos Bruch, Ingenio La Esperanza (Jujuy), 1906). The same subjects posed and photographed slightly differently, with a different background, reveal the photographer choice. In this photo (like fig. 9, 10, and 11) it is very clear what Laureano Segovia said about *chiripa*, the cloth used to wrap the lower part of the body. Museo de La Plata (Argentina).

The expedition was facilitated by the friendship between the then-director of the La Plata Museum, Samuel Lafone Quevedo, and the Leach brothers, Roger and Walter, the English owners of the factory since its founding in 1882. Lehmann-Nitsche was convinced of the urgency to document what was 'disappearing', yet in his writings there is no denunciation of the inhumane conditions in which the indigenous people lived in the *ingenios* camps. On the contrary, he believed in the usefulness of indigenous 'hands' to work on the plantations. In the report published the following year in the *Anales del Museo de La Plata*, titled 'Estudios antropológicos sobre Chiriguanos, Chorotes, Matacos y Toba (Chaco Occidental)', he wrote:

Given the rapid extinction of the Indigenous population in South America, it is important to expedite the study of their physical characteristics, as in the not-too-distant future, it will be completely impossible to conduct accurate surveys of many of these tribes. [...] During the sugar harvest season, hundreds and thousands of Indigenous people from various tribes flock to the sugar mills of Tucumán, Salta, and Jujuy brought by chiefs and interpreters, to perform tasks that only require basic manual labor. Once the season is over, these people disperse and return to their homes in the Chaco and Bolivia. These people undoubtedly represent an important element in the exploitation of the country's wealth, the promotion of industry and trade in those regions, and, in times of need for labor, they form a highly inexpensive and unpretentious workforce, skilled for performing the ordinary and heavy tasks of the fields and mills, for which the European laborer would be too expensive and incapable of withstanding the humid and hot climate of the area. The Indigenous people, on the other hand, provide cheap and easily manageable labor when needed, and during the off-season, they incur no expenses for housing or food. (Lehmann-Nitsche 1907: 53-54, my translation).

Following the dictates of physical anthropology, the skulls are measured, skin color is observed, the teeth are examined, footprints are taken (Fig. 5), and samples such as hair are collected "to be studied in full comfort" (*ibid.*:60, my translation).



The bodies of men and women are photographed both frontally and in profile in front of a white cloth, to achieve greater 'objectivity' as required by the standards of anthropometric photography, with the wall of the house provided by Walter Leach serving

as the background. Photography is assigned an extraordinary role: based on the scientific criteria of the time, it was considered a tool capable of capturing reality objectively, making the subjects measurable and classifiable according to ethnic and racial criteria that linked similarities and differences.

The study published in 1907 presents fifty plates composed of anthropometric photographs with subjects photographed front and side on, both clothed and nude, along with numerous plates documenting measurements of various body parts taken at the *ingenio*, where Lhemann-Nitsche writes: "The Indigenous people we dealt with were very accommodating and pleasant" (p. 56, my translation). Could they have ever resisted in a context of oppression and labor exploitation? He further writes: "When photographing, one must constantly control the Indigenous people to ensure they don't move, to make sure they sit properly, etc." (ivi p. 54, my translation). Contrary to their initial purposes, these photographs today can reveal some invisible aspects of the postcards related to the context in which people were posed, becoming *tipos indios* (indio types)²⁷ created with the intention of depicting indigenous people in their 'natural habitat', exoticized and primitivized, eroticized and sexualized, passive and savage.

Picture Postcards: a multi-layered visual source

Illustrated postcards began circulating in the second half of the 19th century in the United States and Europe, reaching their golden age between the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. They became, in fact, the most important visual and tactile mass media (Gugganig, Schor 2020), widely distributed on a global scale. For the first time, they enabled the mass distribution of images, thanks to the serial reproduction of photographs.

In addition to representing one of the first forms of visual communication, postcards became important and widespread due to their accessibility and low cost, especially among the working and middle classes. They also became collectibles because of their incredible variety and small format.²⁸ As Hinnerk Onken writes, referring to the study of a corpus of postcards from Latin America preserved at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin: "The postcard thus had a truly transnational character: it could cross the globe various times before finding its way into the private albums or archival collections [...]. A photographer, often a European immigrant, would take a picture in

²⁷ The most widespread and well-known corpus is perhaps that related to the photographs of the Italian explorer and artist Guido Boggiani, specifically those depicting the Chamacoco of the Paraguayan Chaco, which Lehmann-Nitsche transformed into postcards in 1904, two years after Boggiani was found dead in the Chaco, decapitated next to his camera. "Colección Boggiani de tipos indígenas" holds 100 postcards originating from the artist's photographs, which today are preserved also in various Italian museums.

²⁸ From the last decade of the 19th century until the First World War, collecting postcards had become fashionable in Europe. As Mariluz Restrepo argued: "Postcards depicting every imaginable topic were available in most countries including the colonies of Western imperial nation. They were not only used as greetings when traveling, but also to send get-well wishes, congratulations, and invitations, and to transmit business requests, invoices, and advertisements. [...] Postcards were carefully preserved in albums, shared with families and friends, and exchanged worldwide. Collecting postcards became a gratifying pastime, giving way to collector clubs, magazines, and national and international exhibition. Every month, millions of postcards were published, sold, posted, and kept by numerous people around the world." (Restrepo 2024: XX).

Latin America (making use of a European technique). The photo might then be sent to a manufacturer in Europe that produced postcards” (Onken 2015: 152).

For completeness, it should be added that the postcards were later resold in Latin America, primarily in urban contexts, and sent back to Europe.²⁹ These incredible circuits and correspondences certainly played a decisive role in creating and spreading a specific imagery of Latin America and, in the particular case I focus on, of the native populations of Argentina in general and the Chaco region in particular. Acting as ‘proofs of reality’, being based on authentic photographs, the postcards could serve as truthful testimonies of distant travels and unknown lands, contributing significantly to the generation of stereotypes, to consolidating them, to feeding contradictory fantasies about otherness and the ‘elsewhere’, or to creating new imaginaries.

Images depicting anonymous groups of people working on plantations are a motif that can be found in postcards from various parts of the world: tobacco, cotton, sugar cane, tea, fruit of different kinds in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It seems to me that these images served the purpose of showcasing the economic productivity and abundance of a country. Specifically, those related to sugarcane plantations are a recurring motif in countries that, at the beginning of the 20th century, based their economy on this productive system, such as Brazil, Cuba, Guyana, Guadalupe, the Hawaiian Islands, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad. On the Argentine plantations examined in this contribution, the goal of disseminating images depicting a productive and profitable country was likely combined with the desire to show a ‘civilized’ Argentina, where *indios pacificados* (pacified Indians) and workers lived.³⁰ Those images served, on the one hand, to affirm the state’s civilizing project, and on the other, to attract investors and new European migrants.

I believe it is appropriate to place these postcards within what Deborah Poole has defined as the ‘visual economy’, based on her study of the history of image making in the Peruvian Andes (Poole 1997). In addition to considering the analysis of visual representations, Poole emphasizes the exchange value of images and their power as objects. These can be accumulated, exchanged, and thus endowed with a use value, placing their circulation within the cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images are appreciated, interpreted, and through which historical, scientific, and aesthetic value is assigned to them (Poole 1997:10):

Here it becomes important to ask not what specific images mean but, rather, how images accrue value. In the dominant European value system, for example, graphic images are evaluated in terms

²⁹ In Argentina, the first postcards began to circulate in 1878. Initially intended for national circulation, they were later sent abroad. At first, they were simple cards without images. Illustrate postcards began to appear in the last decade of the 19th century, depicting key location in Buenos Aires, such as Plaza de Mayo, Puerto Madero, and Calle Santa Fe. They were printed by the Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco. These and many more postcards can be appreciated in the extensive Argentine collection of Hector Pezzimenti, which has been partially digitized and displayed in the online archive of the Centro de Investigación de la Tarjeta Postal en Argentina <https://www.geocities.ws/ceitpa/historia2.htm> (Last accessed: April 1, 2025).

³⁰ The work was considered by the ruling elites as a means of discipline and thus a tool for the transformation of the indigenous communities of the Chaco region, which at the time were still predominantly organized in semi-nomadic groups living off hunting, fishing, and gathering, into ‘citizens’ in the service of the state.

of their relationship to the reality they represent. According to this realist discourse, the goal of all visual representation is to narrow the gap between the image and its referent. The image's value or utility is seen to reside in its ability to represent or reproduce an image of an original (or reality). Within the terms of the dominant realist discourse, this representational function of the image might therefore be thought of as its 'use value'. (*Ibid.*)

The image-object, reproduced in a serial manner, therefore acquires value not only for what it shows and represents, 'the postcard Indians', but also for its function as a *souvenir* in Europe, memories of the Argentine Republic. I imagine that these postcards, following in the wake of the images coming from the New World, had the power to contribute to shaping and reinforcing, by contrast, European identity. As Elizabeth Edwards argues: "Fascination (or desire) is itself couched in contradictions: so similar yet so different, so near yet so far" (1996: 215).

Postcards, unlike many contemporary images, are in all respects objects with a specific materiality, thick paper with two sides: one for the actual image and the other for the text. The back is crucial because, in the most fortunate cases, it provides numerous pieces of information, including messages written by the senders and the names, surnames, and the addresses of the recipients when the postcard has traveled. People on opposite sides of the Ocean, connected by heterogeneous ties, come together in a visual communication, which often (apparently) has nothing to do with the lines of text conveying greetings and affection.

As Kurti argues: "We view postcards as multiplications of narratives composed by multitudes of voices that speak both textually and visually. In fact, they are multi-layered and many-faced appropriations of words, symbols and messages masked, as they often are, by primary functions and purposeful contents" (Kurti 2004:45).

In a postcard from the early 20th century (Fig. 6), a man named August writes from Argentina to his friend Pierre, who is in France, sending him "a friendly handshake" while showing an image of "civilized natives eating".



Figure 6 Postcard, front: “Republic of Argentina – Civilized Indigenous People Eating”. The handwritten on the back (in French) reads: “Dear Pierre, receive a handshake from your devoted August”. Fumagalli Edition, Buenos Aires. Private collection.

We don’t know who August was, nor, based on the research conducted so far, who Pierre Sage was, except that he lived at 68 Rue Boileau in Lyon at the beginning of the century. However, what we do know is that August writes the French translation *Indiens civilisés mangeant* in pencil next to the Spanish text, to ensure the caption’s meaning is precisely understood. How did August view this scene? What did he see in it, and why did he choose this particular postcard? Was it familiar to him or strange? What are the political implications of this image today? These postcards conveyed ‘exportable images’, whose

purpose was to generate a specific image of a desirable Argentina, emphasizing its aspects related to modernity and progress, and thus a 'safe' country with 'domesticated' and 'civilized' natives. This is not so much tourism but rather propaganda, since the subject is the 'native other', stripped of any identity, fixed and essentialized within an objectifying paradigm that reproduces the European gaze and the evolutionary forms of classifying cultural diversity, 'capturing' it through the photographic device. These images unintentionally reveal, above all, the tensions that characterized early 20th-century Argentina—a country in the process of consolidation, governed by a Creole elite formed in Europe, carrying out a 'civilizing process' through the rejection and material and symbolic denial of native groups and assimilationist pressures.

At the historical moment when August wrote to Pierre, postcards depicting cities, landscapes, and 'characteristic' inhabitants of Argentina were being sold with the label *Recuerdo de la República Argentina* printed on them. The 'typicality' of Argentina was found naturally in the landscapes and in two communities, among many others present at the time in the territory of the newly formed national state: predominantly 'gauchos', nomadic cattle herders, folk heroes of Argentine patriotism and national identity, and the 'indios', a single category for a multitude of groups, histories, and identities. Based on my observations, and drawing from historical studies related to postcards traveling from Argentina (see Masotta 2003, 2011), the former are depicted in their work, festive activities, or leisure in rural areas while the latter are almost always portrayed as docile bodies³¹, outside of history, metonymically representing ethnic groups or, according to the criteria of the time, 'races'. In this sense, I think it is important to consider that many of the photographs portraying indigenous subjects, which became postcards, were taken precisely on the sugar cane plantations and within the context of the *ingenios*. The poses the subjects assume in front of the camera express this condition of control within surveilled spaces: seated, posed, naked, depicted while eating, and in moments of intimacy.

³¹ I am referring here to the concept of the "docile body" developed by Michel Foucault (1977), in which the body, as the object and target of power, is subjected, used, corrected, and transformed through discipline. As Foucault writes: "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes the same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (1977:138).

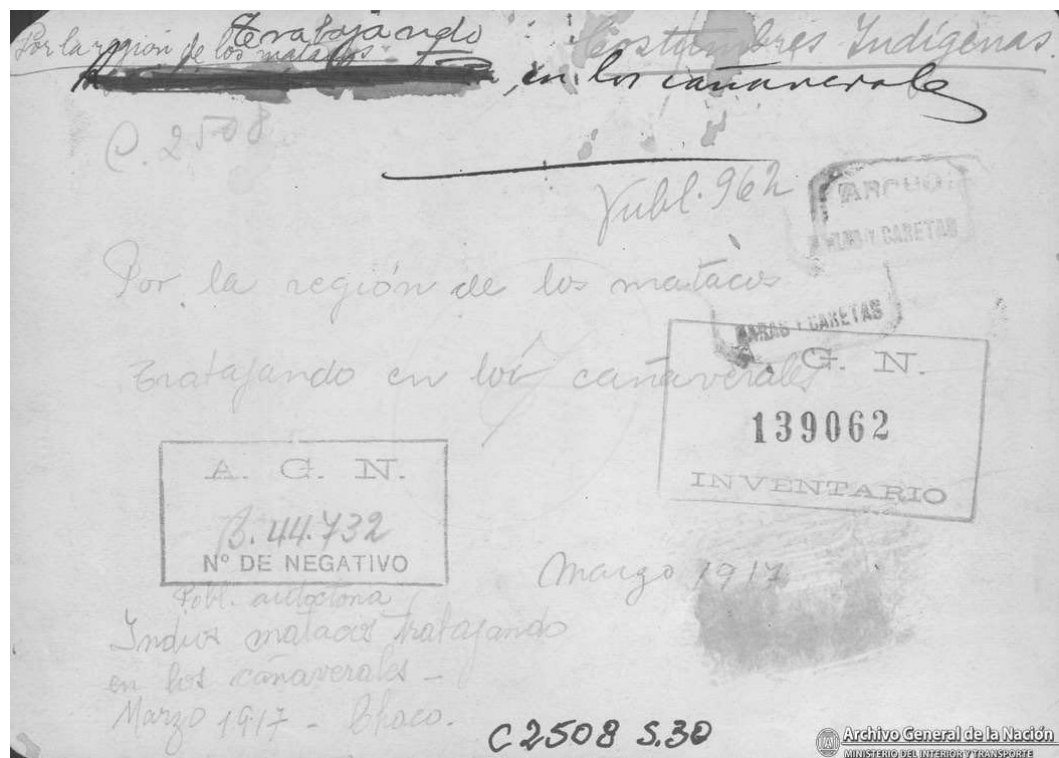


Figure 7 Photo, front and back. Handwritten: "Through the region of the Matacos/ Dinner in the village/Indigenous customs/Native Population/Mataco Indians Eating". Even though there is no precise reference to the author or the context in which this photo was taken, everything suggests it was captured in Jujuy sugar factory. This interpretation is confirmed by the analysis of the Argentine historian Marcelo Constant (2012). Furthermore, we know that they were indeed people from the Chaco region due to the small bag carried by the boy on the right, made from natural fibers of a plant called *chaguar* in Spanish, *kutsaj* in the Wichí language, a traditional element of Wichí material culture, which is still present today. Archivo Genaral de la Nación (Argentina).

Still bodies in traveling images: anthropological reflections on ambiguous postcards from Argentina.

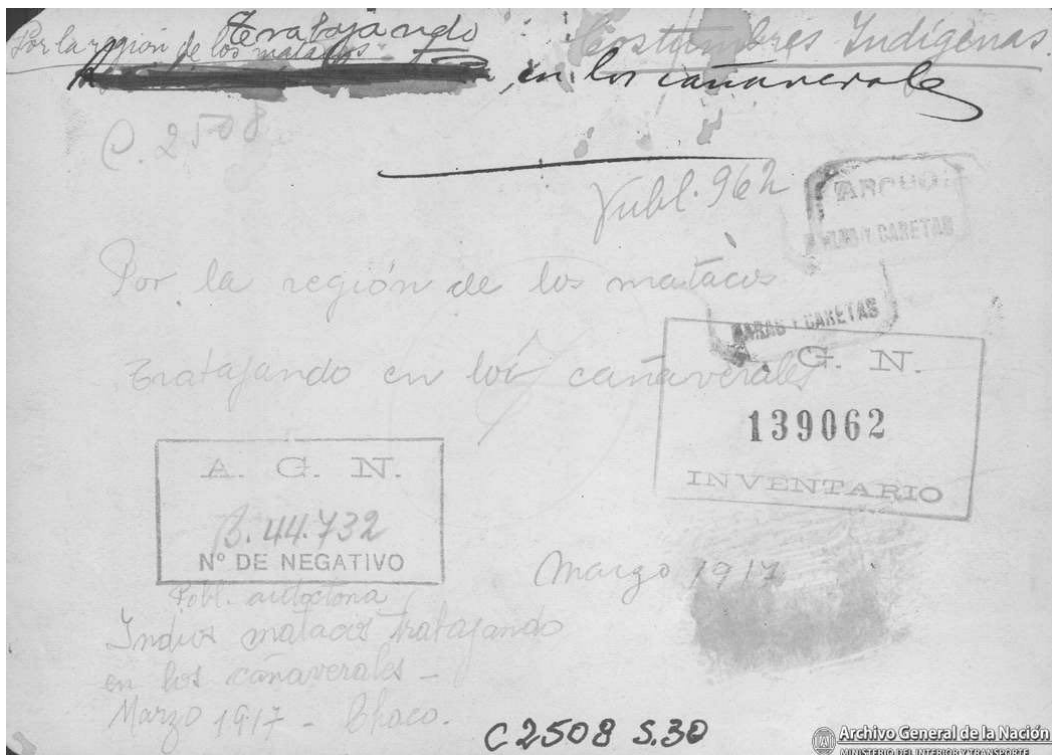


Figure 8 The photo shows Indigenous people working on the plantation. The handwritten caption on the back reads: "Through the region of the Matacos. Working in the sugarcane fields. Native population. Mataco Indians working in the sugarcane fields. March 1917". Source: Archivo General la Nación (Argentina).

Among those analyzed in this paper, only the ones taken among the sugar cane (fig. 12 and 13) show any movement, which in fact coincides with the movement of bodies at work: here, the 'docile bodies' become 'useful bodies', active bodies with effective but controlled movements. The images in question presuppose a series of binary oppositions that, as Edwards illustrates, are central to the metaphorical function of postcards (Edwards 1996:202) – civil/uncivilized, domesticated/wild, unnatural/natural, white/black, moral/immoral, rational/irrational, and we could also add dressed/naked. This difference speaks to the relationship between the photographer and the subjects, but also to the idea behind the representation of the 'postcard natives', who are photographed or, in most cases, posed in ways that reinforce essentializing stereotypes of belligerent, savage, naked but pacified, domesticated, and controlled natives. As Argentine anthropologist Mariana Giordano (2012) points out regarding historical photographs, individual and group portraits (in this case, figs. 9, 10 and 11) are more akin to 'ethnic' staging than to social photography.

The photos taken from structurally violent situations that become postcards seem to double the cynicism precisely because they are inserted into commercial circuits where the exoticized subjects become consumer objects: still bodies inside images that travel.

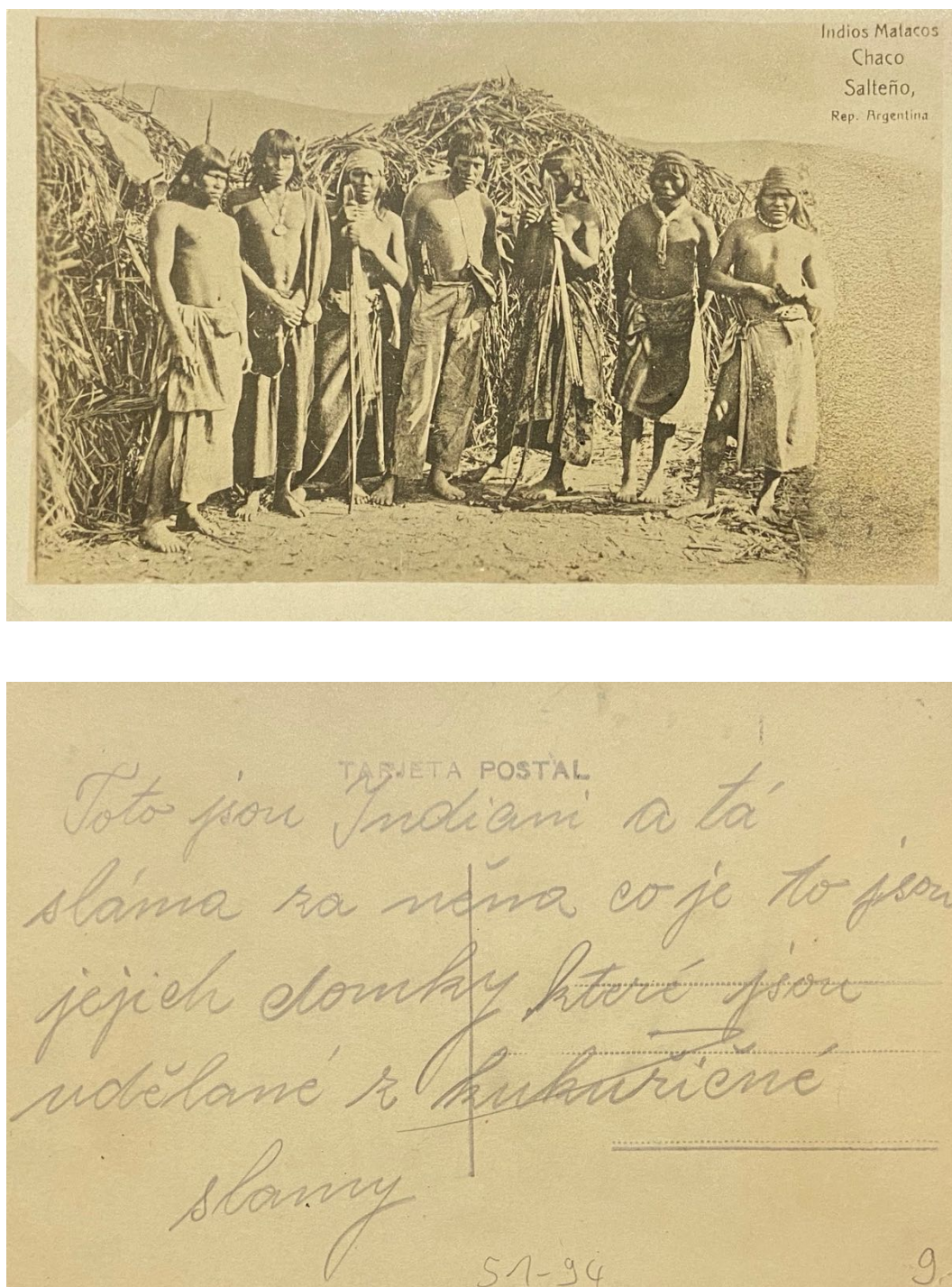


Figure 9 Postcard "Mataco Indians, Chaco Salteño. Argentine Rep.". On the back, the handwritten in Czech says approximately that they are Indians in front of their homes made of straw. Private collection.

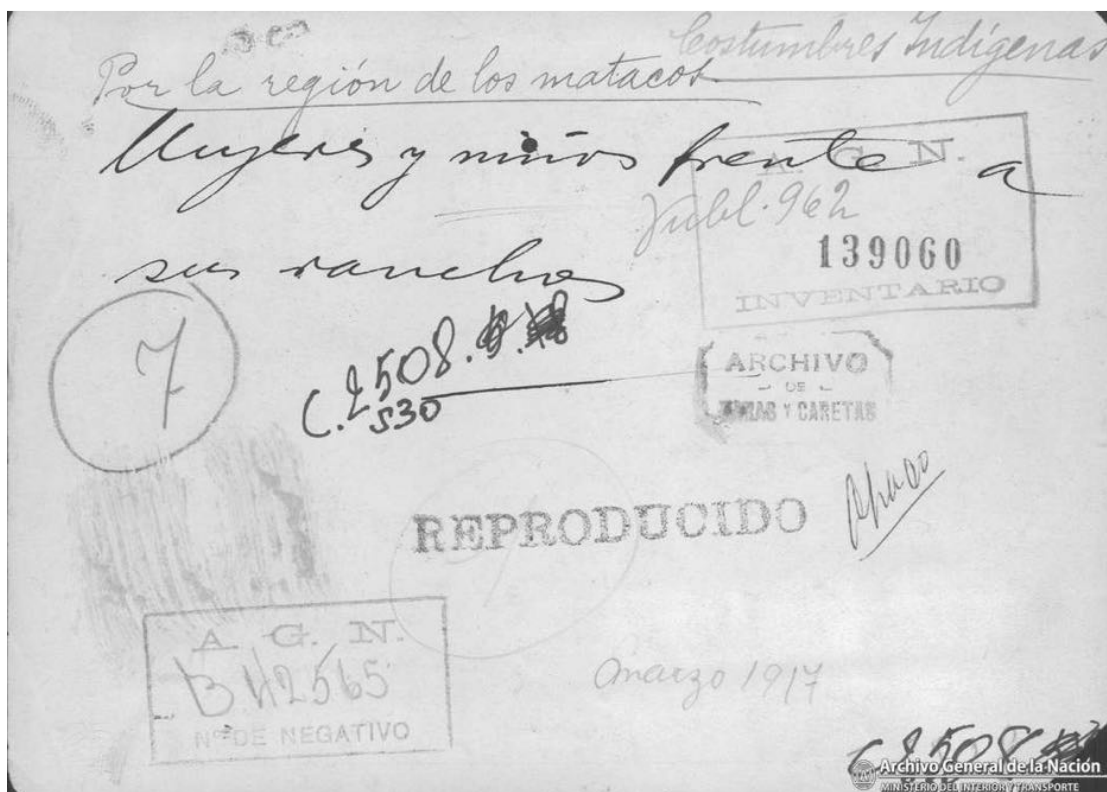


Figure 10 Photo front and back. The handwritten says: "Indigenous customs. Through the region of the Matakos. Woman and children in front of their huts. March 1917". Source: Archivo General de la Nación (Argentina).

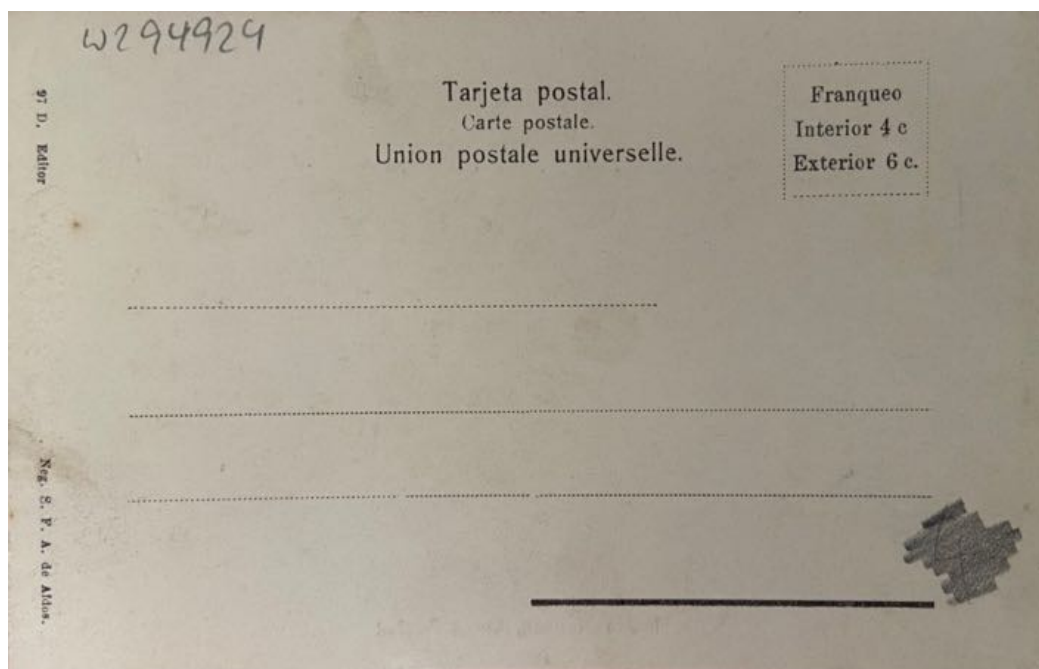


Figure 11 Postcard: “Souvenir from the Republic of Argentina – Mataco Indians, Chaco Austral”. The people posed in a group scene are holding sugarcane stalks. Private collection.

In most cases, the textual component adds confusing and often entirely erroneous information, identifying heterogeneous and anonymous groups with “ethnic” names (such as Mataco, Chorote, Toba) or simply ‘indios’, often geographically located in the Chaco, a vast eco-region that spans several countries and different provinces in

Argentina, often confused with one another.³² Sometimes, the name of the ethnic group is superimposed onto the name of the *ingenio*, as in the case of Figure 12, which depicts a young man with a bow, labeled 'Indio Mataco, Ledesma (Jujuy) R. Argentina', conveniently omitting that Ledesma was not the subject's place of origin but the town where one of Jujuy's most important *ingenios* was located.



Figure 12 Postcard: "Mataco Indian. Ledesma (Jujuy) Republic of Argentina". Source: Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac (Paris).

In other cases, the categorical act of assigning a name to an image is betrayed by the different editions of the postcards: this could happen when the same photographer sold the same photo to two different publishers, with slight alterations made to create two different versions, as in the case of Figures 13 and 14. These postcards show the same scene, this time not posed: we are on a plantation, and there are people with their backs to the camera, harvesting sugar cane. Figure 13 is slightly enlarged compared to Figure 14, and the head of the horse, likely ridden by the person supervising the work, is not visible.

³² After observing hundreds of postcards, I have noticed that, for example, very often, native groups from the Chaco and those from Tierra del Fuego are confused with one another.

The second version was also painted, probably to differentiate it from the first and make it more attractive and closer to reality. From the first, we understand that the photo was taken by Argentine photographer Enrique Carlos Moody³³, probably at the end of the 19th century, during his expedition to explore the Paraguay, Paraná, and Iguazú rivers. This was part of an Argentine scientific mission which traveled through the northern regions to collect local flora and fauna for the 1893 Colombian Exposition in Chicago. The mission, funded by the Ministry of Agriculture, was led by naturalist Gustavo Niederlein, taxidermist Pedro Serié, and painter Augusto Ballerini. Moody was the supplier of numerous photographs for the postcard industry, which was booming at the time. The two images I show were sold to the publishers Rosauer³⁴ and Fumagalli. As in the case of Figure 2, the relationship between images and text seems surreal. The black-and-white postcard (Fig. 13) has the caption "Bon Noël 03," suggesting that it was sent to France as a Christmas greeting in 1903, while the color version, where the caption explicitly states that it depicts natives harvesting sugar cane, was sent to convey "Lots of kisses to Aunt Jeanne."

³³ A cousin of the brothers Samuel and Arturo Boote, from an English family that emigrated to Argentina in the 1840s, prolific producers of photographic albums depicting Argentine landscapes and subjects in the 19th century. On commission or personal initiative, they photographed all the provinces of Argentina. Samuel Boote was one of the most famous photographers and importers of photographic materials in Argentina.

³⁴ The publisher Roberto Rosauer, born in Austria and arriving in Argentina at the end of the 19th century, was the first publisher of illustrated postcards in Argentina and the owner of the main philatelic business in Buenos Aires. From the research conducted so far, I have realized that in the case of Rosauer editions, credit to the photographers is always included, with the names of the authors of the photographs being listed. This makes it easier to understand the history behind the postcards. This is not the case when the author is not mentioned or when the acronym "S. F. A. de A." is encountered, which stands for "Sociedad Fotográfica Argentina de Aficionados", a kind of anonymous collective signature. The society had about a hundred members until 1900, including public figures and politicians (Teixidor Cadenas 2023).

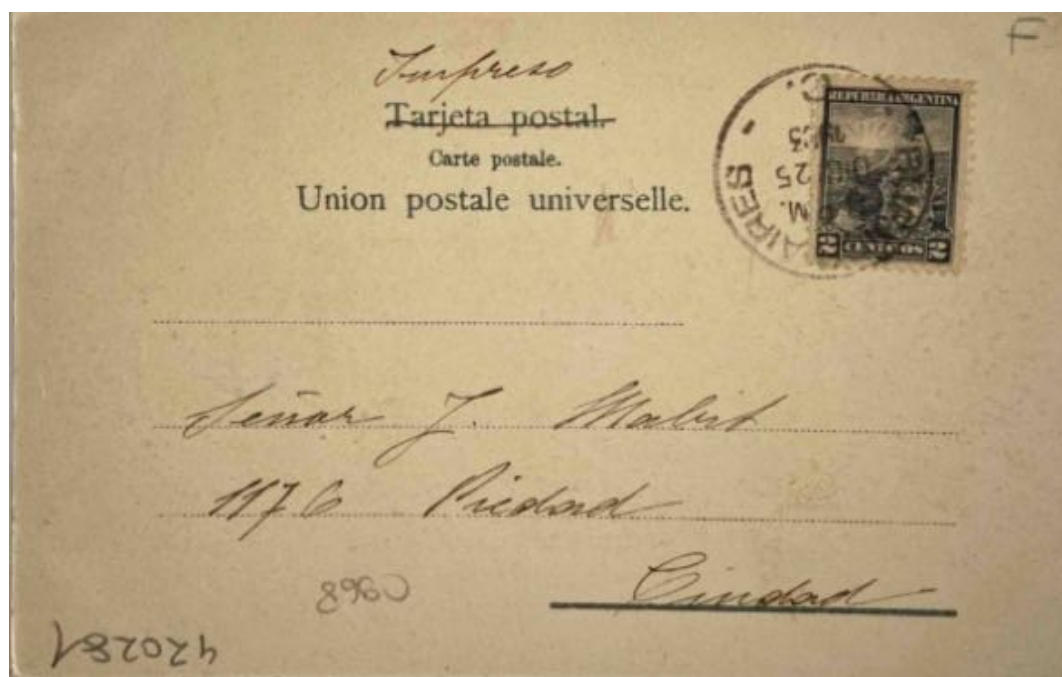
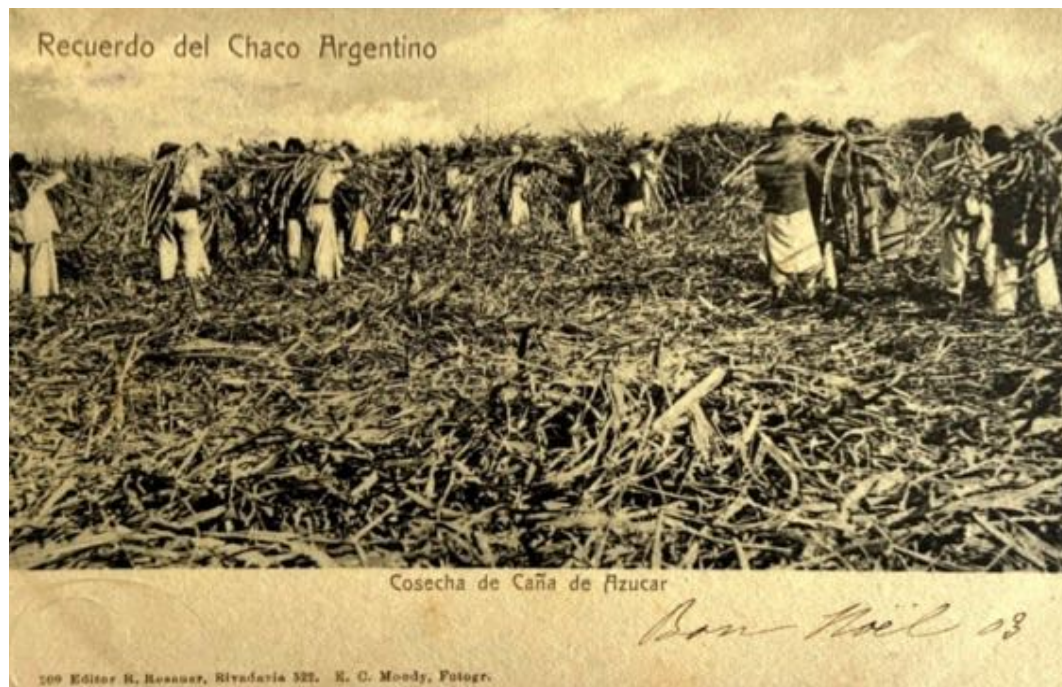


Figure 13 Postcard: "Souvenir of the Argentine Chaco - Sugarcane harvest". Publisher Rosauer, Rivadavia 522 E.C. Moody, Photographer. Private collection.

Still bodies in traveling images: anthropological reflections on ambiguous postcards from Argentina.

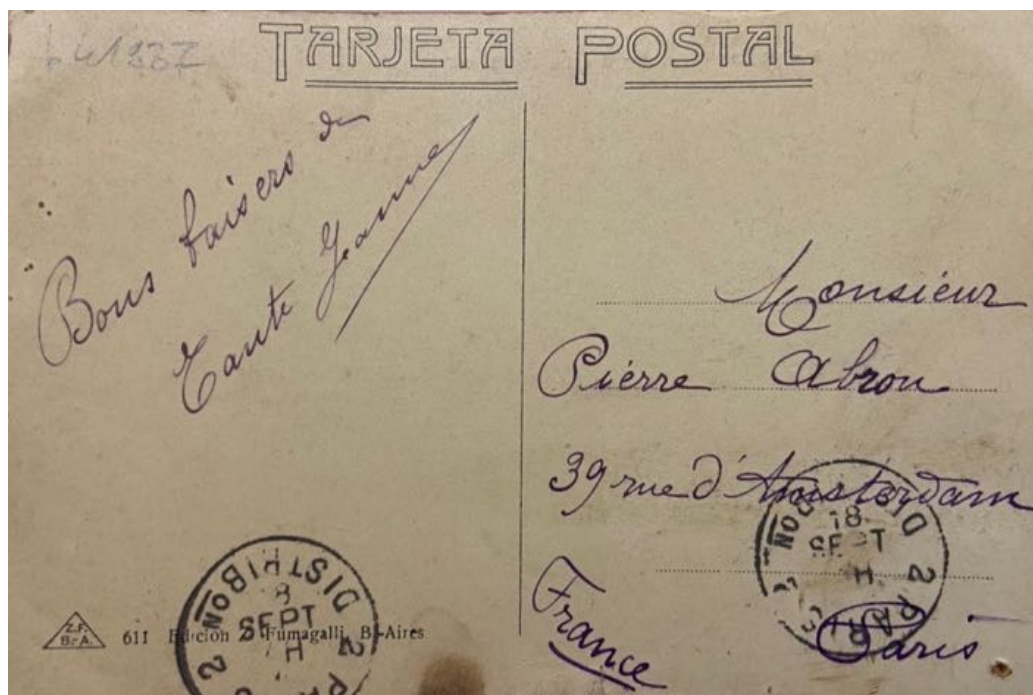


Figure 14 Postcard: "Republic of Argentina - Indians harvesting sugarcane". Fumagalli Edition, Buenos Aires. Back, handwritten in French: "Bons baisers à Tante Jeanne". Private collection.

Another interesting example is a postcard that traveled from Buenos Aires to Rome in 1915 (Fig. 15): here, the image of the "Indios del Chaco" is used to send "Affectionate greetings from Uncle Tancredi" to Miss Olimpia Botto, who lived in Rome, at Via Salaria 123.



Figure 15 Postcard: "Republic of Argentina - Chaco Indians". Back, handwritten in Italian: "Affettuosi saluti dallo zio Tancredi/ 31.8.15". Private collection.

In these cases, the messages sent seem completely out of place compared to the image and the description, which is itself ambiguous. Were these images misunderstood? Were they not given the proper significance, or simply accepted within a dominant worldview that placed indigenous people on the lowest rungs of the social, cultural, and economic ladder? And what did the recipients of these postcards see in

them? How did these images affect the lives of those who received them? How did they resonate in the European homes that hosted them until the next stage of their social life?

Final reflections: images between movements and relationality

Between the final decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the native societies of the Chaco region faced numerous transformations in their ways of life: the definition of national borders between Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, military campaigns aimed at controlling territories and indigenous populations, evangelization by Christian missionaries, forced labor in sugar factories in northern Argentina, and the Chaco War (1932-1935). This led the indigenous societies of the Chaco region to progressive sedentarization, social and political upheaval, and the denial of their languages and cultures by means of internal colonialism.

In this historical moment of profound transformation and social reorganization, photography froze these societies in time, turning them into postcards that became consumer objects in European material culture, enclosed within rectangles of paper, as if they were confined within the boundaries of a plantation. What do the subjects posed before the photographic apparatus—arranged and photographed—tell us, and what do they conceal?

Kurti suggests that postcards: "are fascinating miniatures of historical frames that hide more than they reveal" (Kurti 2004:60). In this paper, I have attempted to reflect on the hidden aspects of illustrated postcards as visual objects traveling between worlds, depicting the native peoples of the Argentine Chaco as still and docile bodies at a time of great and irreversible transformation in their heterogeneous ways of life, linked to territories and resources stripped away by early forms of extractivism, territorial control, and social discipline. These are not ordinary images because the postcards were produced for commercial purposes: within that frame, the stereotypical image of the indigenous person is sold and sent beyond national borders. Native otherness is relegated to the backdrop of history, paradoxically fossilized as an icon of national heritage to be exported. It is paradoxical that these images, now deeply dehumanizing to us, were used as a vehicle to convey the image of the Argentine Republic, transforming indigenous subjects into docile bodies subordinate to the civilizing mission of the national state, turning them into "remembrances of the Argentine Republic". They remain disturbing images, further aggravated by the banality of the printed and written words and the cruelty of common sense. They speak of a visual culture and a way of seeing the world that one felt "natural", almost innocent, to those who consumed them or perhaps - naively - "collected" them as mere objects among others.

As Malek Alloula wrote in his beautiful essay on postcards sent by French nationals in Algeria, "the colonial postcard will set up a rhetoric of camouflage in which only the agency of avowal will appear in the forefront, no matter what theme the photographer may select" (Alloula 1986: 28). We can only grasp the false innocence of the image by shifting our focus from the photographed event to the photographic event itself, and by relating the images to one another. As if it were a genealogy, we can carry out an

ethnography of image families, understanding their kinship, alliances, and conflicts. As David Levi Strauss reminds us: “Photographs exist and operate on an axis of selection meaningful in relation to other photographs in proximity” (Levi Strauss 2003:23).

These postcards can only be understood if placed in relation to each other, with their similarities and differences, if compared to the corpora from which they emerge, to history, and to their mobility, which situates them within a global visual economy and establishes their use value. It is their circulation that brings them to life, and their potential kinship that allows us to understand them.

The apparent humility of these objects, their ability to camouflage and their mobility, have also allowed postcards to go unnoticed, bypassing the logic of archiving and slipping between public and private spaces, thus giving us the opportunity to view them thanks to their audacious capacity to appear in the most uncommon places: from museums to flea markets, from public or private archives to online auctions.

What we are allowed to do, through the qualitative analysis of postcards, is to dive into their ‘radical openness’ (Restrepo 2024) to organize the fragments of the socio-cultural biographies of these objects and observe both what is portrayed, and the relationship with the text. We can also offer an interpretation based on a perspective informed by fieldwork and dialogue with people potentially involved in the analysis, such as representatives of the source communities. This is about connecting the images, making them speak, and weaving together the fragments that, like isolated puzzle pieces, are small clues we can only understand when brought together.

What function can these postcards have today? Their inherent ambiguity raises a fundamental question: what history do they tell? The history of the indigenous people on plantations? The tale of a country seeking to assert itself economically and politically on a global scale? The story of the sender or the recipient? The density of these postcards holds together all these levels, narrating global connections and the disparities between different types of travel and migration: that of Europeans going to Latin America for various purposes, and that of indigenous people in the *ingenios*. They also tell the stories of those who sent images from an unknown continent to known people on the other side of the Ocean. What truth do they tell? What do they save from oblivion?

One could argue that postcards, as material goods, had the capacity to fulfill the genuine desire to see, to give shape and substance to landscapes and people who were only known by name or reputation. However, in this case, it is impossible to forget the coloniality of a gaze and a thought that sees the indigenous subjects in the postcards as objects to be possessed (Edwards 1996:205), much like the postcard itself. These indigenous people, like the postcards, become commodities to be consumed within the bourgeois European taste for the exotic at the turn of the century, the same Europe that invented human zoos and displayed natives from various parts of the world, including Argentina, for observation.

My current research intends to ‘reanimate’ the movements of these images and share them with the descendants or people and communities who may be interested in this intrinsically diasporic visual heritage, which, like any heritage, is political and thus a site of conflict. The study of past images can be important for present-day awareness

regarding the production, use, and circulation of images, which are inherently mobile and mutable. The postcards of yesterday, and their stories, can help us question the very present act of image-making, their diffusion, how they were seen and received, as well as the ethical and aesthetic relationships with the photographed subjects. They can also help us question the types of images we can or should produce today, when we are saturated with images in which we ourselves are images moving within a screen in an immaterial space. Then there is the question of what images are missing, and what images have we not yet seen or understood? I believe visual anthropology can help us reflect deeply on these issues, for example by valorizing different perspectives that offer new interpretations of images. As noted by some Argentine authors (Masotta 2003; Giordano 2012), it is possible to identify elements that point to the agency of the subjects portrayed, in their sideways or furrowed gazes, which may convey a sense of resistance. The 'indigenous people to be looked at' are, in fact, looking at us, forcing us to look at ourselves, to question, to doubt, to trace the genealogy of this reciprocal and uneasy gaze.

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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Aesthetic strategies of the criminalised: political subjectivity in Budhan Stories

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-179

Abstract

This article reflects on a living archive of indigenous film and performance generated by a collective of artists and filmmakers from India's 'ex-criminal' De-notified Tribes (DNTs) in response to an aggressive erasure of their lives and stories in the mainstream imagination. Drawing on this archive, this article examines the making and circulation of films by DNT communities to consolidate a DNT political subject, and interrogates the challenges involved in doing so. Specifically, we interrogate the challenges of visibility for a political subject that is 'unsettled', not marked by a relationship to a (home)land but by a history of criminality. We argue that DNT's entry into citizenship has been predicated on an inbuilt tension between the celebration what makes the community distinct, and indeed criminalised; and a drive towards respectability. This tension articulates in the structure of, the content, the affective life and the aesthetic of their films, generating categories of things that can be said, and things that cannot be spoken. These elements, while in tension, are held together by the aesthetic - in the strategies of sublimation, hyper-realisation, inter-cutting at play in the films.

Keywords

Indigenous, film, aesthetic, DeNotified Tribes, political subjectivity

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Introduction

I was not born a criminal,
I was just a Bhantu,
I was Chhara and Sansi,
Kanjara, Daffer, Khamta and Madari.
Bajaniya, Saraniya, Choli and Kunvaliya
Bherkoot, Nut, Adodiya, Miyana
Here and there,
I was a Nomad roaming all around,
Our history starts in 1871,
When our ancestors were alive,
Behind the bars of our ancestors,
Britishers had such eyes on our ancestors that they locked them up,
All day they would make them do labour,
Torture all the Nomadic communities like us,
Make them their slaves by beating them,
It was like drinking poison everyday,

I was not born a criminal (4x)

They count the bars of prison when alive and even after death,
They studied while making alcohol at the same time,
They did thievery for living,
They did not hesitate to steal everything,
They would entertain people by doing plays,
People kept calling them 'THIEF'
They just dreamt of food,
Life became dark like coal,
The stigma of criminals was on us,
Gone through every bad time.
In prison, there was a whole community of our people.

I was not born a criminal (4x)

Then the whole of India got independence,
Our whole life got destroyed,
No work, No house, No rights.
Even the government made us helpless,
After many years we got independence,
We made a small community,
Police did their brutality even there,
We die fighting for our rights,
We won't lose until we are alive,
We will clean the stigma of criminals till our last breath.

Now sing with me,
All my loving partners,
Everyone lost when against us,
We told the whole society,

I was not born a criminal (4x)

These are lyrics to a song, [*Hun Janmjat Chor Kada Tiya*](#) ('I was not born a criminal'), released on the 31st of August 2020 to commemorate 'Vimukti Divas' the anniversary of the day in 1952 when the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 was finally repealed. This date, 4 years after India itself gained independence from British rule, is now celebrated as the actual Independence Day by millions of people from India's De-Notified Tribes (DNTs). These are groups that were 'notified' as born criminals during British colonial rule, largely in relation to histories of movement, and to colonial policies of settlement. DNTs today comprise a large and heterogeneous collection of communities across India and according to official estimates there are around 198 distinct De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT and NT) spread across the country, (Renke Commission Report, 2008). In the absence of a singular geographical or tribal identity, many DNT communities share other markers of relatedness including language, performance traditions and specific ritual practices that often fall outside normative Hindu frameworks. What unites DNTs structurally, however, is a shared historical stigma: the colonial designation of being 'born criminals' under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), codified older caste-based anxieties about mobility and deviance into law, embedding a racialised logic of criminality that continues to shape state practice (Pilavsky 2015; Brown 2021). More than seventy years after the original act was repealed, DNTs continue to struggle with the inherited stigma of criminality, surveillance, and a de facto denial of citizenship rights.

Sung in the Bhanu language, one that is shared across different DNT communities in India, this song is an act of assertion. By bringing 'hidden' (little known, devalued, erased) histories into lyrical manifestation, the song traces the forced settlement of DNT communities, their enslavement as labourers, and the betrayal of post-colonial promises of citizenship. Bringing these 'hidden' histories into public discourse is, however, no simple act, and in the song, we also find ambivalence and refusal. The public transcript of respectability, as found in the refrain 'I was not born a criminal' clashes in fact with the hidden transcript that celebrates criminality itself, framing thievery as an art of resistance, and expressing anger at the failure of the state and the violence meted upon its people.

Hun Janmjat Chor Kada Tiya is part of a living archive of indigenous film and performance that started in 2020 when, during Covid-19 pandemic, a collective of Chhara¹ DNT performing artists and filmmakers associated with Budhan Theatre began

¹ A community that has been settled in the neighbourhood of Chharanagar at the outskirts of Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat.

documenting and broadcasting the experiences of their communities that were being aggressively erased from the mainstream imagination. Under the umbrella of [Budhan Stories](#)² this collective produced a series of films in indigenous languages distributed through community social media platforms (especially WhatsApp) addressing the experiences of pain and loss, and providing information and entertainment in a time of crisis, through a blend of performances, poetry, songs, and documentary forms. This creative process has since developed into an ambitious program training young people from a range of indigenous and marginalised communities across the country, generating new filmmaking practices, methodologies and visual languages that address asymmetries in the public sphere. Drawing on this living archive, this article examines the making and circulation of films by DNT communities to consolidate a DNT political subject, and interrogates the challenges involved in doing so. Specifically, we interrogate the challenges of visibility for a political subject that is 'unsettled', not marked by a relationship to a (home)land but by a history of criminality.

To understand the challenges of the DNT political subject we engage critically with literature from indigenous media and migrant cinema. Literature on indigenous, migrant, and 'third cinema' has examined the use of media – including film, multi-modal art, mobile phones – as forms of cultural activism, that speak back to power asserting shared identities and setting in motion processes of reparation. Scholars of indigenous media have for example discussed the importance not only of territorial, but also visual and media sovereignty. These terms describe the complex practices of self-representation through which people exercise the right over their own images and their circulation (Rickard 2022; Raheja 2013); and through which they imagine futurity against notions of salvage and erasure (Ginsburg 2018). In the context of migrant cinema, scholars discuss 'guerrilla-style' filmmaking, where filmmaking is an act of resistance and films are laden with political meanings (Grassilli 2008). Key to these forms of visual activism is an active challenging of stereotypes, via the production of new visual languages; and the use of new aesthetic strategies to mobilise images, circumvent power, and intervene in political contexts.

The political subject in migrant films is one that is largely marked by a relationship of continuity / discontinuity with a homeland, and with the host society. This is clear in the themes of nostalgia and the creation of memory driven narratives on the one hand; and the focus on the production of hybridity or 'third culture,' on notions of diversity, transgression, and cultural participation on the other. In this genre of "accented cinema," as discussed by Naficy, the filmmaker is simultaneously located inside and outside and carries a specific 'accent,' a particular aesthetic, by virtue of being in between or in exile (Naficy 2001; Grassilli 2008). Home is often a reference, as an idealised place or a longing, found in the multisensorial dimensions of these films – via food, a sense of smell, taste. Many of these films also dismantle film categories mirroring the 'in between' situation of

² The link is to a website that will not be online for perpetuity. Materials from Season 1 and Season 2 of Budhan Stories that are discussed in this article can be accessed here (Season 1) <https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.c.7476474.v1> and here (Season 2) <https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.c.7478871.v1>

migrants, using hybridity and a remix of styles; and blurring the categories of national cinema, genre, and authorship (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar 2022).

Closer to our case, scholars have asked how filmmakers employ new artistic and aesthetic strategies to represent the lives of those who are politically invisible – from the stateless, to the nomad or refugee (Demos 2013). These discussions show how media can challenge regimes of representation and the (in/hyper)visibility of communities, for example by creating images that are not simply oppositional but that dislocate the very basis of national identity. Or by creating images that question that expand the canons of realism, via the use of fiction as a key element to understanding and expressing traumatic events. In films focussed on the transient lives of stateless persons, those who inhabit “non-places” (Augé 1995), and whose lives are often characterised by a distinct temporality defined by waiting, standard narrative conventions such as agency, event, and temporal progression have often dissolved (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar 2022).

By contrast, the indigenous political subject is one that is marked by histories of dispossession, genocide and cultural erasure – often in relation to the alienation from an ‘original’ land or territory. While in some way similar to the subject of migrant films, the (home)land here is one that harks back in time, to a pre-colonial authenticity, and films often express a concern with establishing forms of presence and continuity. Scholars have in this respect identified relatedness as a key concern of indigenous media productions, referring to media’s embeddedness in social relations (with ancestors, the land, the community past and present); and to the material practices that link past and present, different communities, and generations (Ginsburg 1994, 2018). Media can thus connect a shared past to an imagined future (Lempert 2018).

Survivance is also crucial to the aesthetic of indigenous films. Coined by Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor, the term refers to practices of active presence and resistance that go beyond survival to assert ongoing cultural and political agency (Vizenor 2008). Examining the media works produced by the Karrabing collective in Northern Australia, Biddle and Lea identify an “hyper-real of survivance” that uses art “to make the real more real”, when the real is itself what is at risk, at stake” – this is Indigenous history, territory, language, presence as elements that have been routinely denied, silenced or erased (Biddle and Lea 2018: 6). This “hyperreal of survivance” involves conscious practices of “artificial intensification”, “faking it with the truth”, and “deliberate acts of revitalisation” in contexts of high crisis (Biddle and Lea 2018: 6). Ginsburg (2018) identifies the “indigenous uncanny” at play in indigenous films, as a blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Media may give visibility not only to unspoken histories but to less visible relations, with the dead featuring as a glimpse or a haunting, that unsettle the normality of settlers’ presence on indigenous territory.

These sets of literature are useful to examine the challenges of the DNT political subject. However, unlike the diaspora’s imagination of home or the indigenous claim to an original land, in case of DNTs we have a dispersed idea of home, a displacement that cannot be remembered. Settlement becomes the mode of entry into both citizenship and modernity. It is a forced process, that goes alongside the criminalisation of former

livelihoods and identities. The movement, in other words, is from a non-place to a place, that of the settlement camp. While in other dispersed communities subjectivity often centres on a homeland, for DNTs the sense of home is far more ambivalent. We have in fact a belonging to a place that was once a prison, with walls that have now been dismantled and yet remain a key structure of the societal system in which DNT children grow up. Alongside the issue of movement, we also have the prominent one of criminality, one that is crucial to the question of visibility, and that structures the very process of film production and distribution.³

In this article, we focus on the specific challenges of visibility in the making of a DNT political subject/s. We identify a particular dilemma or tension between the celebration of criminality and its histories, by turning names of injury into names of pride; and the desire for inclusion and recognition into the realms of citizenship, of respectability, via a denial of the same. In the films we examine, this translates as a constant play of light and shadows between that which can be said and made visible, and that which cannot be spoken, and must therefore remain hidden and unseen, including those things that are too painful to express, those elements of experiences that escape capture in words, those things that are too dangerous to say or too revolutionary in a time yet unripe. This tension takes on new dimensions in the context of digital expression and circulation. While literature on digital activism tends to celebrate the digital as a space for liberation that enables new forms of connectedness (Abidin and Zeng, 2021; Krutrök, 2021), we must be attentive to the ways in which digital materiality also creates new forms of (self)censorship. This is more so in the context of a community which, marked by the historical stigma of criminality, and continuously at risk of state violence, must carefully curate its intervention into the public image of itself, holding together a demand for respectability with the community's intricate affective and material reality.

This article is based on long-term collaboration and situated ethnographic work through a combination of on-site and long-distance engagements (the latter of which had to be innovated in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic), using filmmaking and theatre as elements of an arts-based method. One of the authors, Alice Tilche (AT) has lived and worked in India for many years, has worked with film herself and has collaborated with members of Budhan Theatre since 2010. The other author, akshay khanna (AK) is an anthropologist, theatre practitioner and activist based in India, who has worked with marginalised communities and social movements for over two decades. In this article, we begin by developing a notion of the DNT political subject historically and in relation to the political and artistic interventions of Budhan Theatre. We then dive into the analysis of this evolving archive with a focus on the political work of films in generating new forms of relatedness; and on the aesthetic strategies at play, especially in overcoming the tension between that which can be said, and that which cannot be spoken.

³ The case is closer to the one of the Roma who, allegedly originating from India, and with links to DNT communities themselves, have travelled through countries without a sense of a homeland – with travelling being key to both a conception of freedom and to the criminalisation of identities.

<https://romaniarts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Beyond-the-Stereotypes.pdf>

The DNT as a political subject

Unlike many forms of indigenous or migrant media shaped by relationships to an origin or homeland, the DNT political subject emerges not from memory of place but from the condition of forced settlement and enduring criminalisation. We draw our notion of the political subject from Ranabir Samaddar who, departing from European traditions that view the political subject as developing from self-consciousness (as in Hegel), examines “how politics creates its subject... who authors politics” (Samaddar 2010: xviii). Samaddar deprioritises metaphysical concerns and instead traces the subject’s emergence through materiality, as a result of conflicting circumstances, or “situations,” which create “positions.” Studying the political subject means tracing these genealogies and conditions. It is in this vein that we consider the historical and contemporary emergence of the DNT political subject.

DNTs, estimated to comprise 110 million people in India today, were categorised as ‘born criminals’ under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. The Act institutionalised the belief that some populations were hereditarily criminal, enabling classification, surveillance and control without legal due process (Dandekar 2014). Those targeted tended to be oppressed castes, tribal or third gender (primarily the Hijra community that the Act wrongly named as ‘eunuchs’) who lived at the margins of society as nomads, surviving on petty trade, pastoralism, raiding, slash and burn cultivation, and as itinerant bards and performers – livelihoods that the colonial administration considered wasteful and close to the realm of animality. The CTA managed anxieties around ungovernability by enforcing settlement and taxation (Arnold 1985; Yang 1985), procuring labour (Gould and Lunt 2020), regulating sexuality (Hinchy 2019), and absorbing ‘ungovernables’ into the colonial order (Brown 2016). It is this attempt at ‘bringing into the fold’ that placed then Criminal Tribes at a threshold of modernity, between civilisation and the savage, between the subject and abject, between human and animal. While the colonial state codified the figure of the ‘born criminal’ into law, the notion of hereditary criminality was not entirely new (Piliavsky 2015). In this sense, colonial governance rearticulated older precolonial ideas of certain socially marginal groups as hereditary or professional thieves – caste-like communities with their own religious practices, moral codes, and transmission of skill – into racialised and juridical regimes of control.

In the early 20th century, many DNT groups, including the Chharas, were moved to settlement colonies where they worked as labourers on roads, railways, and agricultural or industrial projects. Camps such as the old criminal settlement at Chharanagar functioned as open prisons, with movement restricted through routinised activities and spatial controls (Johnston and Bajrange 2014; Pandian 2009; Radhakrishna 2008; Schwarz 2010), structured around the appropriation of labour. The CTA was repealed in 1949, and tribes were finally ‘De-Notified’ in 1952, five years after Indian independence. Yet the stigma of criminality endured through the simultaneous enactment of the Habitual Offenders Act (Bajrange et al. 2020; Devy 2006). Today, DNTs remain among the most precarious populations in the subcontinent, working in the informal economy as manual labourers, agricultural and construction workers, performers, and street entertainers. In

the absence of alternative livelihoods, communities like the Chharas are often tied to illegal occupations such as brewing and smuggling alcohol (prohibited in Gujarat, where Chharanagar is located). Their branding as criminals fuels systemic discrimination, reinforcing poverty, labour precarity, and exposing them to state violence. The stigma of criminality is thus a continuing social, economic, and political phenomenon granted continuity not least through the rearticulation of the CTA logic in contemporary law. In Chharanagar, now an urban ghetto of about 20,000 people, houses from the old settlement still exist, their architecture a testament to the history of incarceration. And although physical walls no longer demarcate the settlement from the rest of the city, Chharanagar remains excluded - autorickshaw drivers routinely refuse to go, and Amazon couriers refuse to deliver.

The DNT is a peculiar category jurisprudentially, legally, and politically. The postcolonial Constitution created affirmative-action categories to redress historical injustices for oppressed castes, tribes, classes, and religious minorities (e.g. as Scheduled Castes and Tribes), but 'Criminal Tribes' were left out - effectively denying the specific historical injury of criminalisation. Gandee (2018) traces this exclusion through the contestations surrounding the category of the 'depressed classes' and the emergence of caste and untouchability as the central political question for the new nation-state. She also highlights the prioritisation of maintenance of public order over recognition of past harm, and the pervasive view that these communities (seen as unruly, 'uncivilized,' and almost animal-like) required re-education before they could be granted entry into modern citizenship (Gandee 2020). Rather than a positive Constitutional or legal recognition, thus, the DNT is jurisprudentially constituted of a double negativity. The first is the active negation of rights, entitlements and public presence that continued into postcolonial citizenship. The second is temporal, as the law that criminalised DNTs no longer exists, and neither is the marginalisation legally recognised as anything beyond an act of the colonial administration. In the absence of Constitutional recognition, DNT communities have had to rely on localised political bargaining in the federal structure, with communities disparately accommodated within other protected categories in different states, and some not recognised in protected categories at all. This legal limbo, combined with a history of nomadism and displacement, undermines DNTs' potential to act as part of "political society" (Chatterjee 2011) and to unite as a political front with tangible goals, just as their exclusion from education prevents them from acting as "civil society" (ibid.). There is thus no structural position for the articulation of a DNT political subject within the schema of the Indian post-colonial nation. The emergence of a DNT political subject, therefore, requires creativity; in Samaddar's terms, it requires the subject to 'author' politics.

The political subject in Samaddar represents a collective modality of action. It emerges not through existing techniques for the exercise of power, but in resistance to them, thereby bearing an ethics of resistance and innovating a new set of practices (Samaddar 2010: xxiv-xxv). This aligns with the notion of "unruly politics": a refusal to speak the grammar of politics as defined by those in power, insisting instead on another language (Shankland et al. 2011, khanna 2012). This subject does not disengage from power; rather,

it engages the state on its own terms. It is this kind of insistence on new languages of politics, or new modes of political action, aesthetics and forms that challenge what is acceptable and intelligible to the state that characterises unruly politics (khanna 2012:165). In what follows, we trace this creativity in Budhan Stories and note the emergence of the DNT political subject as one that generates new languages, circulations, alliances, and modes of entry into public and political discourse.

Budhan Theatre and Budhan Stories

Budhan Theatre takes its name from Budhan Sabar, a person from the Kheria-Sabar DNT community in West Bengal who was killed in police custody in 1998. The group was founded the same year with the support of writer and activist Mahasweta Devi and linguist and literary scholar Ganesh Devy, as part of the DNT-Rights Action Group advocating for the rights of De-Notified Tribes. Based in the Chharanagar community library, they became a platform for collective experimentation, education, and political action. Their objective, as articulated in their best-known play *Budhan Bolta Hai* (Budhan Speaks), is to resist enforced silence and transform the historical stigma of criminality by turning attention to the multiverse arts of these communities: “born artists rather than born criminals” is their motto. It is also to offer an emotional and reparative outlet, for – as Artistic Director Dakxin Bajrange explains – performing others’ pain helps to make sense of one’s own.

Over the years, Budhan Theatre has become embedded in community struggles, with members mobilising around rights violations, legal cases, and offering support to affected groups. Since its start, the group has performed over a thousand plays addressing issues from police brutality to forced evictions and communal violence. Staged with minimal props, their plays adopt a raw and affectively charged aesthetic aligned with Grotowski’s “poor theatre” but shaped by the urgency of real trauma. Budhan Theatre has also collaborated with academics, artists, and activists worldwide, receiving support from international funders and developing international visibility. However, its work continues to be rooted in precarity as funding is often unreliable, and much of the group’s work continues to be sustained through informal voluntary labour by community members. In 2009, Bajrange set up Nomad Movies as a media unit of Budhan Theatre and as a platform for the struggle of different marginalised communities (Friedman 2011). While Bajrange considered this transition a continuation of their work, with media being “just a different space” to that of theatre, the shift from stage to screen transformed not only the technical process but also the dynamics of performance and spectatorship.

This transition gained renewed urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital media became an imperative for existence itself. For DNT communities, the crisis marked not only a deepening of material precarity, but also a form of re-criminalisation, as mobility, central to their livelihoods, was suddenly curtailed. The abrupt national lockdown, cordoning of informal settlements, and the absence of basic state support precipitated a collapse of survival systems. DNTs were among the millions of migrant workers who walked hundreds of miles to return home, many dying en-route, in one of the largest mass migrations in South Asia’s recent history (Ellis-Petersen and Chaurasia,

2020; Misra, 2022). Several of the groups featured in *Budhan Stories*, including the Bahurupia, Nat and Madari, have long earned their living through itinerant theatre, acrobatics, and music. With movement criminalised, these performance practices became impossible, and begging (an activity that is also criminalised under Indian law) was often the only remaining option. The pandemic thus reinforced longstanding stigma, cast DNTs once again as outside the moral economy of the nation, and made digital circulation not only a creative turn but a necessary condition for survivance.

At the onset of the pandemic, *Budhan Stories* developed as a community-led project supported by long-standing academic partnerships. These collaborations were crucial for navigating funding, ethics protocols, and training and built on the networks and alliances created by Budhan Theatre over the years. While the project was made possible by academic funding, its creative direction remained firmly in the hands of the Budhan Theatre collective. The project also became a space for building wider solidarities: it involved new partnerships with other DNT and marginalised Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities, theatre and political groups across India, as well as institutional platforms such as art galleries or museums. In terms of the creative process, we, the academic collaborators, initially played a more active role in the making of the films, but this quickly became minimal, with artists taking the lead in shaping the creative direction and academics offering post-facto reflections. The process was shaped by mutual learning: while we supported research design, training, and infrastructure, it was the artists who determined the form and content. Collaboration, in this sense, became a way to reconfigure the structures of academic research, while preserving the autonomy of community knowledge production.

From the outset, the method of *Budhan Stories* was grounded in the artistic and political traditions of Budhan Theatre. Film production followed a collaborative, arts-based process in which theatre functioned not only as a mode of representation but also as a method of research. Scripts were developed through collective improvisation, memory work, and community discussion rooted in lived experience. While Budhan Theatre draws primarily from Indian traditions of social and political theatre, techniques from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed were introduced during the project by AK, adding a new dimension to the group's practice by facilitating collective storytelling (see Sjoberg 2006). Theatre was thus not only a form of expression but a way of generating shared narratives. Similarly, film was not simply used as a tool for documentation but became part of the meaning-making process itself, a way of holding together different knowledges, generating connections across DNT communities.

At the time of writing, *Budhan Stories* is going into its fourth season, each representing a shift in focus, in the location, theme and the set of filmmakers themselves. Our focus in this article is specifically on the first two seasons, made at different points of the Covid-19 pandemic. While Season I was made during the first lockdown and was shot exclusively in Chharanagar, with a focus on the experience of the Chhara community itself, Season II travels to various locations, telling the stories of other DNT communities. Each of these films is 15-20 minutes long and tells a complex, gripping story that resists easy genre

categorisation. Blending documentary, fiction, music video, storytelling, and theatre, the films form a unique, polyvocal assemblage addressed to multiple audiences.

Rather than a documentary film, which typically presents a story that has already played out, Budhan Stories can be seen as a mechanism by which its members discover and come to terms with their own story as it unfolds. In this sense, the podcasts offer an “analytic of existence” as the process of making opens up avenues for exploring communities’ own histories and present experiences (Lea and Povinelli, 2018). As McDougall explains, “corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world” (McDougall 2006: 3); with films conceived as an embodied form of looking. Film and life merge via the bodies of the makers, and via the material process of making. In this respect, the films must be understood not only in terms of the content but in relation to “the physical engagement on the part of crew and cast with the profilmic event; the near identity between the cast and their roles; real location shooting; and film’s inherent indexical property” (Nagib 2020: 175). They are about capturing experiences, via active listening, and “speaking nearby” participants (Trinh T. Minh-ha, as cited in Chen 1992). Circulated through community social media networks, these films speak to one’s own community in one’s own language, as a community space in which to make sense of unprecedented suffering, as the precarity of centuries took on another dimension altogether.

Films of a given genre tend to share narrative elements, recurring themes, stylistic conventions, emotional registers, and aesthetic techniques. Even in its participatory mode, the documentary often assumes an outsideness of the gaze, creating a (sometimes productive) tension between filmmaker and subject. Ethnographic films, particularly in their reflexive modality, focus more explicitly on this relationship, favouring slow immersion in the everyday and arcs centred on particular characters. In this sense, genre shapes not only the structure and feel of a film but also the expectations of its audience, telling us something about the subject who produces the film, and the subject who consumes it. Budhan Stories is interesting precisely because it defies these categories. It draws on a range of genres – not only documentary or ethnographic styles, but also drama, horror, and Bollywood. There are reasons for this unique form, and these reasons relate to the “situations” and “positions” (Sammadar 2010) that shape the emergence of the DNT political subject.

The political work of films

In the context of ongoing histories, of displacement, settlement, and criminalisation, the films produced as part of Budhan Stories enable the consolidation of a DNT political subject at the margins. We look here at how this takes place in a context where claims to a (home)land are not the binding factor for collective identities.

The films generate, on the one hand, forms of vertical continuity with one’s own community, by employing a politics of presence – via the mobilisation of language, the shared intimacy of pain, and by establishing forms of relatedness with ancestors. The first season of Budhan Stories was filmed between May and December 2020, during India’s first national lockdown. At the time, the outer borders of Chharanagar were shut, police

patrolled movement, and the space resembled the open prison of 70 years earlier. From this space, the team produced episodes that provided accessible up-to-date information on the pandemic, alongside interviews and theatrical performances on themes like the experience of quarantine, the impact of lockdowns on livelihoods, the changes in death rituals, or the specific implications of the pandemic on women and children.

As well as providing information, the films are here an attempt by members of the Chhara community to make sense of their own experience. Shot during lockdown, when filming beyond the narrow streets of the neighbourhood was impossible, Season I is marked by both physical and psychic interiority. The episodes are mostly filmed indoors, with the camera focusing on physical details of hands, faces, objects. In a particular moment of fear, and of awareness that the crisis is serious, global, and unprecedented, here is a community speaking to itself, reflecting upon its own material, affective and metaphysical conditions of being. What we have then is an interiority that is not merely a metaphor, but a materiality.

Recorded in the Bhamtu language shared by Chharas with several other DNT communities across India, this season addresses an “intimate community”. As Bajrange explains in the opening episode: “we are an intimate community ... we live close together and have never had to be distant from each other”. Inviting inputs and ideas, he explains that the podcasts are a space for the community to share experiences. Language brings together a community that is partly in a defined place, the ex-criminal settlement at Chharanagar, but also beyond a territory, by reaching out to historically connected Bhamtu speaking groups in the ex-settlement colonies of western and eastern India. The making of films in Bhamtu, and their circulation via social media, allows for the creation of an intimate community that is both local and scattered, with reference to a shared language rather than a shared sense of home or territory. This is a community that brought together by the shared intimacy of pain as episodes narrate the unprecedented loss of livelihood for the doubly marginalised, and the sudden and premature death of its members.

In addressing this “intimate community,” Season I generates forms of continuity and connectedness not only with the living but also with the dead. The dead are powerfully present in the films, either as vivid images rupturing onto the screen, or as affect. [Episode 3](#), for example, is entirely dedicated to how changes in death rituals during the pandemic disrupted the relationship between the realms of the dead and the living, and features close-ups of the dead, and the details of faces in mourning. Episode 5, featuring the adaptation and performance by Budhan Theatre actors of the Hindi short story “[the village of the dead](#)” (Murdon Ka Gaon, Bharti 1956), reflects on the unprecedented suffering of the marginalised, the migrant labourer, during the pandemic. It features interviews with community members who recently lost their relatives and includes the WhatsApp video of a well-known member of the community gasping for his last breath in an ICU unit. These films re-establish continuity with the dead in a context of sudden death, when rituals were disrupted and the dead lingered as ghosts, troubling the lives of the living. This is in a community where the dead have a key role in enabling the continuity of the life of the living. Granting the dead a proper place is crucial for such continuity, and therefore the process through which the dead take on their new place in the community is not merely

about mourning, but about the struggles of life itself. This is precisely what Vizenor terms “survivance”, that is an insistence on the importance of life; and simultaneously on historical and structural violence being remembered as a mode of continuity with one’s past.

If Episodes of Season I are about generating intimacy with the community and vertical forms of connectedness with ancestors, Episodes of Season II move outwards, focussing on documenting the experiences of other DNT communities in between subsequent pandemic waves; and on generating horizontal forms of connectedness. These are established by examining the vulnerabilities of communities during the pandemic, identifying their commonalities, and relating them to shared histories of criminalisation in the past and in the present. This, in turn, generates common demands for recognition and the emergence of a political and eventually revolutionary voice.

In Season II we have a reconfiguration of the traditional distinction between the subaltern subject/object and the privileged (colonial, dominant caste) gaze, with one marginalised community documenting the experiences of other marginalised groups via a relation of intimate distance. If in the early episodes the audience was most explicitly the Chhara community itself, and the subject and the audience intermingled in ways that unsettled the mode of audienceship, in Season II the subject is more clearly demarcated with the audience seated outside the process of the film. If not an outside gaze, in a simple sense, the films are also no longer only speaking to one’s own but address a more abstract audience constituted of diverse positionalities that include other DNT groups, civil society, the state and a more abstract superaddressee (Bakhtin 1981). The narrative voice (whether of the anchor, or of performers) is also one that is now familiar with the documentary form, introducing the audience to the community, their history and struggles. Season II was an instructive moment of political awakening for members of BT themselves who, by listening to the experiences of other communities learn about the histories of other groups, the conditions of their existence and struggle, reflecting back on commonalities with their own. It is also an instructive moment for other DNT groups who, by virtue of featuring in the films, learn about the experiences of other groups and connect to the political and artistic work of Budhan Theatre.

Episodes of Season II present an explicit political voice. There are clear demands being made, which are easier for the audience to identify as such. The actors and the interviewees are composed, their words well-chosen and addressed outwards. We hear of a shift to begging during the pandemic - an activity that fell largely on women and further criminalised the community. We learn about the deepening educational gap given by digital education, about living in poverty, about evictions and resettlements, and about the overall exclusion of these communities from the mechanisms through which humanitarian support was extended by state and civil society alike. These issues are all articulated as demands rather than expressions of pain. There is, in other words, a specificity to a political voice that makes demands, laying out frameworks of (in)justice and demanding the interlocution of the state.

The clearest political demands are made from the chair. These are plastic chairs placed outside of households, where interviewees speak holding onto the armrests projecting

their voices with clarity. The chair is a key symbol of authority, especially in rural India and in poor urban settings, where entire settlements may only have one chair available that is shared for important guests. Elevated from the floor, sitting on a chair also means not sitting on dirt, and is as such loaded with the political connotations of caste hierarchy and pollution. Demands made from the chair, with a few exceptions, are articulated by men. Other voices, largely those of women, speak instead from the floor: sitting or squatting on the mud floors of their kitchens. Their demands from the floor are more like laments: “what can we do sir”, some conclude, addressing the interviewer behind the camera. The apparent helplessness of the lament is, like that of men, a political modality of address that should not be misread for passivity (see Das 2007). This is especially as many of the women we see on screen, ran entire households on their own during the pandemic, defying lockdown restrictions to beg, as men took on more passive roles for being easier targets of police retaliation, but also out of a sense of entitlement to ‘better’ work. Spoken from the chair or the floor, these monologues possess what Bakhtin calls the quality of dialogue, addressed to multiple audiences (1981).

The articulation of a DNT political subject is, however, not straightforward. Because of DNT’s specific histories and ongoing stigma, not all demands can in fact be expressed directly. In Chharanagar, extortion and violence by the police is quotidian. A film featuring bootlegging, for instance, would inevitably invite a raid, if not something more serious. While Budhan Theatre’s plays have always been political, with actors fearlessly performing in front of police stations and at sites of violence, with film, people and places became more directly exposed. Therefore, the film production process was, more than the traditional theatre format, subject to a local politics of what can be shared, while responding to external expectations. In some of the episodes, the more powerful statements relating to the failure of the state to address the vulnerabilities of communities were edited out for their potential to create problems for those who spoke. Filming issues of marginal livelihoods, and more controversial topics to do with the alcohol business, community quarrels, gender politics, restrictions on intimacies and marriage, was also subject to community censorship (as we will see, it is only in the final episode of Season II that alcohol, so central to the lives and livelihood of the community, features on screen). Censorship was not only towards the state, and as a community within a community, Budhan Theatre had to account for different sensitivities, with those who supported their documentation efforts, and others who resented any ‘negative’ portrayal of the community as further damaging to their reputation.

This dynamic echoes a wider tension in the politics of self-representation among other marginalised communities. Parry’s analysis of the “Koli dilemma” (1972), for instance, shows how groups may alternately embrace or suppress aspects of their identity depending on context, in the pursuit of respectability or upward mobility. This politics of disclosure and concealment is well documented in Dalit contexts, where cultural forms such as beef-eating or drumming are both celebrated and hidden. Once associated with death, pollution and untouchability, the parai drum has for instance become a powerful symbol of assertion in political rallies and cultural festivals through processes of re-symbolisation (Mosse 2012). Yet this transformation is selective, and often incomplete.

Funerary drumming remains a lived reality in rural settings, as do the caste violence and humiliation that accompany it. Continuing to beat the drum, even in 'positive' contexts, may risk reinforcing stigma, which is why many performers now avoid rhythms tied to funerary practice (Gorringer 2016). In Adivasi activism, too, similar tensions surface: the transformation of rituals into 'tribal art', like the Pithora paintings of the Rathava, involve the stripping away of key elements such as intoxication, meat, sexual imagery, and possession traditionally associated with the painting, to reflect dominant caste expectations of purity and morality (Tilche 2022).

That which cannot be spoken, however, is ponderous beyond 'meaning', with structuring effects precisely for its absence. In this respect, in the films, it does not simply disappear. It insists, it rearticulates in other forms and places, within the body of the film itself, sometimes as silence, sometimes as affect, sometimes as aesthetic.

Aesthetic strategies

The films present a series of aesthetic strategies to say that which cannot be said and to articulate the political voice. To understand this, we need to interrogate the plays of light and opacities in the practice of film-making. This is not merely a metaphor, especially in the context of film, where the editorial choices are an explicit management of what can be made visible, and what must remain unseen, and what negated.

Episodes in both [Season I](#) and [II](#) feature an assemblage of key elements and a consistent bending of, and experimenting with, the boundary between reality and fiction. Drawing on Budhan Theatre's experience, the first key element is performance—adaptations of plays, stories, monologues—each referencing real experiences, deaths, and events. The hyper-realised melodrama of these performances speaks to a specific mode of feeling and performing emotions, and to the psychic moment in which the season was filmed, bringing individualised feelings of anger and helplessness into the collective, emergent public sphere. Alongside these are traditional-style interviews with community members, seated in plastic chairs at home, their words made palpably domestic through cutaways. Holding these together is the figure of the anchor, both guide and empath, who generates affective continuity between expression, experience, and information. Songs form the fourth element: composed in genres from folk to rap, filmed in rooftops and narrow community spaces, they are sung as a lament or as a call to resilience and hope.

In Season I we especially see the use of sublimation as an aesthetic strategy employed to render visible that which cannot be otherwise spoken, both in relation to the articulation of events that are too traumatic to directly express; and in relation to the articulation of a complex DNT political subject. For Freud, sublimation refers to the dispelling of the 'infantile erotic wish' in favour of socially acceptable behaviour (Freud 1905, Laplanche and Plantis 1988: 431-34); it is also a mechanism of transformation identified as the origin of artistic activity. Here we read sublimation as a mechanism through which an impulse that is too terrifying, or culturally 'inappropriate' to express, re-articulates in another form that is culturally acceptable – in this case via the aesthetic. Rather than sublimation as an evasion of the impulse, in the films we see otherwise 'hidden' elements rearticulating into forms that are legible and acceptable, while still carrying within them the kernel of what

was dangerous or forbidden. It is via the aesthetic, in the elements of music, dance and performance, that what is hidden and cannot be said articulates, complicating the 'public transcript' (Scott 1990) as spoken via interviews and more traditional documentary forms.

As a compelling example, is the absurdist adaptation and performance of the Hindi short story "[the Village of the Dead](#)" in Episode 5 of Season I. Shot in a dark room, four actors sit in a closed circle with their faces folded into shadows by a candle placed in the middle, the performance tells the story of a dog who ate a human heart, from the perspective of the dog itself. In the story, the dog wanders at night to find half-dead bodies, the bodies of migrant labourers, of slaves, of Covid-19 patients. These are people who are too helpless to love, and so hungry and thirsty that, as the dog bites into their flesh, they too begin to drink their own blood. Through the storytelling, we move from the stillness of the candlelit room through hallucinatory scenes of poverty, hunger, cannibalism, and slow death. The performance is simple and yet so vivid that what we do not see becomes powerfully present and, in this respect, the creative elements that stray from the observational canon serve to create closer, more emotive accounts of experiences that are otherwise too painful, or forbidden, to directly feature on camera. The scale of the horror that the story references is in fact so immense, that a documentary representation would have reduced it to individual or evidentiary matter. This is in any case, at a time when that story could not be told – with the state actively prohibiting testing for Covid-19 and using extraordinary laws to incarcerate journalists for reporting on the pandemic. Instead, the ekphrastic narration overrides not only the absence of the visual presence but also the limits of visual representation (DeSilva, 2021) creating the a/effect of the crisis.

Crucial to the articulation of pain, the category of that which cannot be spoken is also at play in the articulation of a DNT identity. The films, on the one hand, frame DNT communities as respectable citizens, demanding witness to their struggles for survival. This is the voice of dignified victimhood structurally expected in the documentary form, of the unfairly marginalised evoking a moral economy. It is worth noting, for example, that in Season I, alcohol makes no appearance on screen despite it being crucial to the local economy and to its shutdown during the pandemic, when alcohol became both more sought after and harder to procure, and its sale now not only associated with criminality but with the spread of the virus. The public transcript, however, pushes other experiences into the realm of the hidden transcript (Scott 1990). This is, on the other hand, the experience of the women who run the production side of the alcohol business, the young man who chooses to work in the business of bootlegging, or indeed of petty theft. Returning to the opening video, we find a striking disjuncture between spoken word and image, as the chorus "I am not a criminal" contrasts with the affect of the song, the anger in its choreography and the unapologetic 'bad boy' aesthetic: dancing inside cement structures, evoking incarceration, torn jeans, bandanas, reversed baseball hats and angry faces. Here we see the self that expresses pride in being able to feed one's people through the art of theft, which expresses anger at the failure and violence of the state, and a revolutionary impulse without being tamed into a policy negotiation. The hidden

transcript has ruptured onto the main stage, partly in words, but most effectively sublimated as aesthetic.

In Season II, a more overt articulation of the political voice reconfigures elements of the assemblage. As compared to the role of sublimation, for example, performances here highlight reality through hyper-real re-enactment and generate horizontal connections via juxtaposition. [Episode 1](#) of Season II, for example, tells the stories of the Bahurupia community of itinerant performers whose livelihoods collapsed during the pandemic. The episode features two performances, the first from the community itself and the second from Budhan Theatre's actors, both of which are intercut with interviews. In the first, the community performance, we see actors dressed in a range of costumes, of gods, goddesses, and other characters from modern Hindu epics. These scenes are spliced with interviews of male community leaders describing the violence and struggles faced by their people. The frame is visually striking: the lead actor wears a white foundation with black moustache and sideburns, while another, painted with a bloodied eye, speaks solemnly to the camera. The second performance by Ruchika Kodekar, a lead actress from Budhan Theatre, is intercut with the interviews of women, who bore the brunt of feeding entire families through beggary during the pandemic. Dressed up as the mother goddess Kali with her face covered in blue makeup, her tongue sticking out, the actress paraphrases but also interprets the interviews, both for the community and the viewer. As women recount their struggles, walking miles to beg for food, and being beaten up by the police while pregnant for doing so, Kali Mata echoes:

I am mother
 And I am hungry,
 My children are also hungry,
 My household is also hungry
 Hunger and struggle have very old connections
 When the pandemic came everything stopped,
 There was no work
 And no grains of food to eat
 I was pregnant at the time
 I was hungry
 And with me, my children were hungry too
 When I asked for food, then I received sticks
 After falling down, I had to go back
 You entertain yourself with TV and mobile phones
 But I am a born artist
 Yes, a born artist
 Which you call Bahurupia
 I feed my family by showing my art
 But today I am receiving sticks instead of food.

The creative use of intercutting as a technique produces a rich ethnographic layer, which picks up, reinterprets, transforms, augments and hyper-realises the political voice. This exists in continuity with a longer tradition in Budhan Theatre's theatre practice, which

takes real-life stories and re-enacts them both to communities and to power. Differently from theatre, in film the interpretative work of Budhan Theatre is made more clearly evident: there is a reality to which the hyper-real performances directly refer. Through the intercut, these are made adjacent, creating continuity, in meaning and affect, between temporalities.

If in this first episode the political voice, although augmented via performances, remains composed, as we move through the series, we see a shift from a more respectable voice to an unruly one, one that, paying witness to the sheer dispossession of the participants eventually calls for a revolution. "[They treat us like animals](#)", is the title of episode 9 – a line echoed by several interviewees alongside accounts of chronic hunger, backbreaking work, and lives consigned to the most abject poverty, with no hope of redemption for themselves or the next generation. Focused on the Sindhi-Dafer DNT Muslim community, one of India's poorest, marked by both religious and historical marginalisation, the episode uses interviews and hyper-realised performances linked through intercutting. But here, the actors do not merely echo the interviewees; they rupture through the screen, demanding the attention of both audience and state. "Our children are not very smart," says one woman, seated on the mud floor of her home, "we have raised them on food every other day. We have to live under this oppression." Rather than mirroring these resigned voices, Budhan Theatre actors interject with a parallel dialogue that urges those with power to act. The shift in tone and addressivity (Bakhtin 1981) is striking: where the actress playing Kali once spoke as the interviewee, here she appears as herself, taking centre stage and speaking in her own voice, directly to the viewer: "Those who care about the weak should speak," she exhorts. "Would you be hungry and stay quiet? One must speak up." In doing so, the performers address Bakhtin's superaddressee: the imagined third party who listens sympathetically and understands justly.

Conclusion

Season II concludes with a [rap song](#), sung in the streets of Chharanagar by the core team of Budhan Theatre actors-directors. The song, itself a mélange of music video and documentary styles, holds together a series of contradictions. For the first time, we see the illegal brewing of alcohol on screen, via vivid images of plastic containers bubbling with foam, and of the distilled liquor poured into old whiskey bottles. We also hear about its centrality to the community in terms of sustaining its livelihood, for which women are central. We see the celebration of Chharanagar as a "good place" alongside the acknowledgment of theft, bootlegging, gambling as the key economies of the community. If people like to fight, they also like to dance. The song is a hymn to the community, and an instance in which the 'injurious' and the 'respectable' come together, coexisting with tension yet not in contradiction. We have here the articulation of the Chhara/DNT political subject, one that is unlocated and yet rooted in the community, with Chharanagar (literally the place of the Chharas) itself referred as "my country" (mera desh); a subject that is criminal/ised and yet with an ethical element to the self, there is a sense of justice and importantly a sense of joy.

Produced in a context of high crisis, in the midst of a global pandemic in which DNT communities became even more evidently dispensable, the films of Budhan Stories are an instance of art as survivance (Biddle 2016), offering an insistence on life. The films enable the consolidation of a political subject and collectivity at the margins, by generating forms of connectedness, continuity and presence. This is first and foremost in the material process of making the films, as artists become aware of their own conditions of existence and experience and of that of other DNT communities, via the use of the Bantu language, the identification of shared vulnerabilities rooted in common histories of marginalisation. The films establish forms of continuity within the community in the present: the sense of a collective self, of shared sorrow and joy, of what is in the very first episode evocatively called an 'intimate community'; and with the past, via the presence of ancestors and the dead. They enable the emergence of a political voice that makes specific demands and speak the language of justice, and ultimately a revolutionary voice that creates the imagination necessary for collective action.

The DNT political subject we have presented, is one that is not structured by a relationship to land, homeland or its absence, nor by a notion of pre-colonial authenticity to which it desires a return. Neither is it a subject that can simply be understood in terms of an oppositional frame of the self and other but is rather an unruly subject marked by (ongoing) histories of movement, settlement and by criminalisation. As the result of 'conflicting circumstances', this subject is not one that is idealised, but one that plays with its own illegibility, a politics of the oppressed that must hold together what seems from the outside as contradictory. In examining the making and mobilisation of films we identified a duality in the DNT political subject between the celebration of what makes DNT community distinct, and indeed criminalized, and a drive towards respectability. The films are characterised by an interplay between this duality. There are categories of things which cannot be spoken, which must however find articulation. These elements, while in tension, are held together by the aesthetic - in the strategies of sublimation, hyper-realisation, inter-cutting at play in the films.

The creation of a sui generis assemblage in Budhan Stories, was a practical solution developed by the collective of artists to the shutting down of physical spaces for embodied performance creatively addressing the restrictions of filming during a pandemic. It was also an aesthetic-political strategy to circumvent issues of censorship and to give expression to an 'unsettled' political subject, with no clear position from which to speak. As an anathema to the project of modernity, this is a subject that is not easily absorbed within the forms of recognition offered by the postcolonial nation - of language, territory, caste, religion. It cannot, in other words occupy existent political forms of intelligibility. As such, this unruly subject emerging from ongoing histories of criminalisation must be creative, insist on its own language and generate a new grammar of politics.

Acknowledgments

The research for this article was generously funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK [AH/V008684/1 and AH/W006766/1] and supported by the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. The argument was developed by the authors in dialogue with the artists who produced the underpinning films. We are especially grateful to all members of Budhan Theatre including Dakxin Bajrange Chhara, Atish Indrekar, Chetna Chhara, Siddharth Garange, Keyur Chhara, Anish Garange and Ruchika Kodekar who is unfortunately no longer with us, for their excellent films without which this article would not be possible and for contributing to the development of ideas. We would also like to thank Yashodara Udupa for her continuing support on this project.

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Through the pain of the gaze: multiple publics and the broken grammar of testimony in the visual representation of political violence in Palestine

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
[dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-181](https://doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-181)

Abstract

The article aims to draw critical reflections on the production, circulation and reception of images in Palestine, given the recent rise of political violence in the context of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonialization of Gaza and the West Bank. Reflections move from the author's personal relations built during fieldwork in the occupied West Bank, and from the exchange of pictures, messages and video calls as a sort of "protracted ethnography". In the context of Israel's control on images and the ban on international journalists to enter Gaza, the first part of the article questions Palestinian images as a mode of testifying to Israeli state violence. By contrast, in the second part, the representation of Palestinian suffering is considered through visual contents produced by Israelis, who made them circulating through social media. Ultimately, the article explores the performative character of images in creating multiple publics who differently relate to the visual grammar of testimony in the globally contested field of Palestinian memory. From this global perspective, "the pain of the gaze" is thought as a necessary although uncomfortable standpoint, from which to grasp traces of presence, life aspirations and the quest for justice.

Keywords

Palestine, political violence, visual mediation, publics, testimony

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Images, violence and testimony: contested memories and the intimate gaze

On 15 August 1944 14 partisans and three peasants were shot dead by German occupying forces along the wall of Malga Zonta, a cottage on the Alpine front between Veneto and Trentino regions in Italy¹. Two pictures represent the scene before the massacre: in both of them we can see the partisans lined up against the wall with their hands raised as a gesture of surrender.

The two pictures are taken from opposite angles: although obliquely, we can see the partisans from the front. In one (Fig. 1), three partisans look at the camera, in the other (Fig. 2), we can see the back of a soldier standing in front of them, and the tip of a rifle appearing beside him. This second photograph reveals who's the gaze behind the camera. Today, these two pictures are hung in big size both on the external wall of the cottage and in the museum exhibition of what is known as "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum². A handwritten caption below both photographs say: "(12 August 1944) Final instances of the heroes of Malga Zonta (Photograph found in a German's wallet)"³.

If these images were born to document the successful violence of the German occupation of Northern Italy by the very actors of that violence, they also became a testimony of the Italian partisans' "martyrdom" for freedom, which sustains their heroization in national memory⁴. The photographs of the Malga Zonta massacre therefore contribute to the patrimonialisation of memory that the park-museum intends to preserve.

¹ The Italian word *malga* refers to a mountain cottage, to which peasants from the plain bring their cattle in summer to pasture in the green uplands. On 12 August 1944, 15 partisans of the Brigade "Garemi" were found hidden in the cottage by the German army. After last desperate efforts to resist the Germans who had encircled the place, they had been lined up against a wall of the cottage and had been shot, together with the peasants who had harboured them.

² "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum officially aims to preserve the memory of "the short century" that goes from the Second World War until the end of the Cold War. "Base Tuono" was the NATO missile base that was established at the Coe pass in 1966 for anti-Soviet purposes and managed by the Italian Air Force. The original building of Malga Zonta was demolished to establish the military base. Today, the park comprises three main points of interest: a small house that is supposed to re-materialize Malga Zonta, a museum and the demarcated area of the NATO base. So, the park-museum simultaneously evokes and contributes to establishing the historical continuum between the Italian resistance against Nazi-Fascism and post-war Italy's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

See <https://www.basetuono.it/en/index.html>

³ All translations from Italian in this article are mine. Here is the original caption: "(12 August 1944) Ultimi istanti degli eroi di Malga Zonta (Fotografia rinvenuta nel portafoglio di un tedesco)".

⁴ I use the expression "martyrdom" because of its widespread use in the memorialization of Italian fighters' resistance against Nazi-Fascism (see, for instance, toponymies in Italy, such as "via Martiri della Libertà" as street name). While the Italian resistance is still a debated discursive field that stirs up tensions between right-wing and left-wing parties, the language of state institutions reveals post-war celebration of the Italian armed struggle as an essential part of national memory. At the same time the "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum clearly shows the connection of this process of memorialization with the Italian-American alliance, which resulted in the North-Atlantic Treaty in 1949.



Fig. 1 Malga Zonta, 12/8/1944. Cortesia di Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.



Fig. 2 Malga Zonta, 12/8/1944. Cortesia di Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.

Malga Zonta pictures help me to introduce some preliminary questions that this article attempts to address: how do images take part in political violence? In which ways do they circulate between the opposite poles of power relations, and what happens in this process? How does their mobility affect collective identities and memory construction? This article focusses on the production, circulation and reception of images in the context

of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonialization of Gaza and the West Bank. Starting with a small (visual) piece of Italian history, my aim is not to compare different historical and political contexts, but to grasp some insights about the ways of seeing violence and what they imply. I present here some preliminary considerations related to the Palestinian case, which stem from the anthropological analysis of visual contents produced both by Israelis and Palestinians. This visual production belongs to recent times, and has emerged from the escalation of political violence accompanying Israel's ongoing war on Gaza – what the International Court of Justice has defined as a “plausible genocide” of the Palestinian people. The visual contents I discuss here include photographs taken by Palestinians and sent to me, and Israelis' videos that have been posted on social media and can be easily found on the internet after having been republished by online newspapers. This various set of visual and audio-visual products share Palestinian suffering as their main subject. It consists of vernacular images that are produced by smartphone cameras and disseminated through social networks. This article questions how these images frame Palestinian suffering as a conflicting visual field within the broader frame of contested memories concerning Palestine/Israel. I rely on Ted Swedenburg's conception of memory as “complex and fractured global discursive field” (Swedenburg 1995: xxix), which is constantly reshaped by the interplay of nationalist discourses, Israel's ideological and repressive apparatuses, and the international support based on the “Zionist-Western liberal hegemony” in knowledge production (Said 1992). My analysis of these contents is wittingly grounded on a “situated gaze” (Haraway 1988), since it is based on personal relations I built during my fieldwork in the occupied West Bank from 2011 to 2014. My interest for images comes from the exchange of pictures, messages and video calls through smartphones, which I conceive as a sort of “protracted ethnography” based on affective ties and collaborative research reciprocity⁵ that have exceeded the time limits of standard fieldwork. In my experience these emotionally involved exchanges intensify in times of intensifying violence against the Palestinians, like the present one.

The aim of my reflections is not to isolate images concerning the violence of Israeli settler colonialism as a peculiarity of the last period. Rather, I would like to explore how the mobility of images participates in a wider system of mobility, linked to invasion as the structure, and the elimination of the indigenous population as the main character, of settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon (Wolfe 2006). In this sense, the settler nature of the Israeli state makes its violence both the referent and the condition of possibility of images, which implicitly or explicitly relate to asymmetric power relations between Israel and the Palestinian people. Of course, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides comprise different actors and positionings: when we talk about contextual

⁵ Beyond the personal and affective dimension of my relationships with the Palestinians involved in this writing, the reciprocity of the collaborative method operates on two levels: on the one hand, analytical categories and critical reflections have emerged over time from our encounter, transcending the emic/etic divide, and are continuously and consciously tested through our relationship itself; on the other, my article is based on words and images offered to me, which are then explicitly discussed in light of my research aims – aims that simultaneously embrace my friends' goal of making images speak about Palestinian life.

expressions of violence that are captured through cameras, this especially involves the Israeli army and settlers on the one hand, and Palestinian civilians on the other⁶. However, my interest is to question images as cultural products, which connect the contingency of visual production to specific power relations. In this sense, the focus on the mobility of images, that is their local and global circulation, responds to the need to analyse visual contents while encompassing the social processes sustaining both their production and reception (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002). From this perspective, the formation of “publics” who participate in the contested visual field of Palestinian suffering is a key issue of my visual analysis.

Approaching images through the relationality they presume reminds us of Ariella Azoulay’s definition of photography as an “encounter” implying the medium, its user, the image subject and the ones who watch it (Azoulay 2015). At the same time, to focus on images produced during last Israeli war on Gaza we need to consider the historicity of visibility, that is how this “encounter” has been shaped over time. In her research on Israeli photographic archives, Azoulay has focused on the dispossession of Palestinians through the looting of Palestinian images and archives. This looting has been based on the progressive production of an “Israeli” visibility, born on the concealment of the violence of the foundation of the Jewish state. Archived images taken by Zionist militias that later conveyed into the Israeli army, are thus accompanied by a narrative that ousted or camouflaged the relationship of domination and resistance, which the images themselves were the result of. Arab figures were described as “infiltrators” or “refugees” in the captions, as well as Israel’s destruction of Palestinian homes were presented as “targeted” demolitions to defeat “terrorists” (Azoulay 2011, 2015). Although Azoulay conceptualizes these encounters as relations between Israeli citizens and Palestinian non-citizens within the nation-state frame, her research results show how the Israeli state building was linked to the removal of Palestinian indigeneity and the naturalization of the Jewish settlers’ presence in Palestine. What is more interesting in Azoulay’s research is her attention to the looting that does not concern only material expropriation, but rather “takes place in plain sight”. Referring to digital platforms that publicly share photos of Israeli soldiers taken

⁶ “Settlers” and “civilians” are complex notions in the context of the Israeli settler colonialism. To provide a fundamental distinction, we refer to settlers as the Israeli citizens now living in the occupied West Bank, that is out of Israel’s internationally acknowledged borders, which is illegal according to international law. Although the settlers’ world is socially, religiously and politically composite, it reflects the settler colonial project of the Israeli state and its plan of annexation of the Palestinian land. The link of the Israeli settler population and the army is complex and multi-faceted, but the army’s complicity with settlers’ violence in the West Bank has been widely documented in recent years. The actual Israeli government and its extreme right leading forces have made the alliance between the military and the settler branch of the Israeli society more explicit (Pilotto 2024). From the Palestinians’ point of view, settlers (*mustawṭanīn*) are an essential part of the military occupation and accompany the expansion of the Israeli sovereignty on the Palestinian land. “Civilian” has become a highly politicized notion in contemporary wars (Gordon, Perugini 2020). According to the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, civilians are the people who are not directly engaged in armed activities. In my use I refer to civilians to talk about ordinary Palestinian people living their daily life. Following the Oslo Agreements, which provided for “security coordination” between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, it is this latter that has a monopoly on weapons and represses the spread of weapons among the population in the West Bank. What last Israel’s war on Gaza clearly shows is the intentional blurring of the legal notion of “civilian” through Israeli representatives’ public declarations claiming that “there are no uninvolved civilians” in Gaza, in order to legitimize the moral necessity of Israel’s “self-defence” and the mass killing of Palestinians in front of the world.

during “reprisal operations” in the 1950s, Azoulay writes: “These public spectacles [...] are essential elements in training Israeli citizens not to see the violence they consist of” (Azoulay 2017: 11). Thus, Azoulay emphasises the emergence of an “Israeli” audience based on the pillaging of Palestinian life through the Israelis’ gaze itself.

Although a comparative historical analysis is not the aim of this writing, we need to bear in mind the global dimension of visibility in the history of Palestine. Scholars have highlighted how a decolonial approach should consider the broader history of domination, displacement and resistance, as well as the Orientalist imaginary, in which “Palestinian” visibility has been entangled. From Ottoman times to European and Zionist colonialism, this visibility marks the Palestinian presence and its ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity, despite various efforts to remove it (Aranguren, Barillaro 2016, Khalidi 2010, Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022, Sanbar 2004). In this sense, images acquire the value of document and testimony to Palestine’s existence “from its living past to its living present” (Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022: 1). If cultural and visual production attest continuity and permanence, Palestinian life goes with the lively production of Palestine as “continuous meaning-making and productive labor of and by ordinary people, within and beyond formal structures and institutions” (Tawil-Souri and Matar 2024: 3). Questioning representation as part of Western epistemologies, this creativity is rather linked to “knowing practices” and “structures of feelings” that transform Palestine and Palestinians into moments of (political) becoming.

Ultimately, if visibility is the output of multiple positionalities, temporalities, practices and encounters, a crucial question remains: who is able to see the violence of images that is enclosed in the images of violence? Let us return to Malga Zonta pictures for a while. The Venetian writer Luigi Meneghello made reference to them in several of his writings, and told about the social life they acquired within the local Italian community. In his most famous book, *Libera Nos a Malo* (1963), he describes how Fig. 2 had touched Cattinella, a woman who worked as a maid for Meneghello’s family. She was the mother of Zampa, one of the murdered partisans. The author writes that the woman had managed to get a copy of the photograph, which she kept in a drawer, while on her bedroom wall she had hung a framed depiction of the partisans of Malga Zonta “with small roundels of heads and names: among others there is the partisan Zampa, Giovanni Tessaro 1925-1944” (Meneghello 1963: 161). The woman’s painful recovery of photographs of her murdered son is thus differentiated: his portrait can be exposed, while the scene of his death sentence must be hidden in a drawer. As Alberto Brodesco has sharply noted, “the rhetoric of memory all in all comforts, and can be exhibited; the direct testimony, the photograph that has managed to stop that dramatic moment forever, creates new pain instead. Official photography makes mourning noble; testimonial photography makes it alive” (Brodesco 2005: 3).

In Palestine the question of memory and testimony is crucial. Like Cattinella, who embodies both glory and mourning as a situated and affected relation to photographs, in this article I consider “the pain of the gaze” as a privileged site from which to watch and reflect upon images in Palestine. I draw this perspective from a feminist sensibility in visual studies, and particularly from Tina Campt’s definition of images as “experiences of

intensity" that must be "felt" and not only watched (Campt 2012, 2017)⁷. One of the main points is thus: who's *shooting* whom – in the double sense of producing visual representation and hurting at the same time? The link of politics, memory and affects is thus central to approach the multiplicity of images, networks and audiences that affect Palestine both as locality and global discourse. This double sensibility to see and feel, which I give priority here in methodological and ethical terms, also prevents me to publish the images I discuss. Where possible, readers will find links to go and watch eventually. Through the media, those not directly involved in the war are inundated with images of violence and death in Gaza. However, the gesture of Palestinians exposing their own suffering – at the heart of this writing – cannot be mine: since my gesture would rely on the suffering of others, I prefer to focus on recounting that gesture, rather than offering a disjointed imitation of it. It is also a way to preserve confidentiality, especially for Palestinians who have collaborated to my research. This deals with the reality of images, and the link of intimacy and violence they expose.

Palestinian testimony in the digital world

In February 2024 55 American and British journalists sent an open letter to the Egyptian and Israeli embassies in London to claim "free and unfettered access to Gaza for all foreign media"⁸, denouncing how reporters' entry into the Strip is only possible under "the rare and escorted trips with the Israeli military". These restrictions on foreign journalists implied that Palestinian journalists do the great job of reporting Israel's war on Gaza to the rest of the world, while they and their families are under bombardment and in some cases become direct targets of Israeli attacks. According to the Palestinian Health Ministry 190 Palestinian journalists were killed since the beginning of the war until the end of November 2024⁹, and more than 74 were arrested, in what the Committee to Protect Journalists defined as "the deadliest period for journalists" ever documented¹⁰. UN condemned the ban on international journalists' entry into Gaza¹¹ and defined target attacks and killings of Palestinian journalists as "war crimes"¹². Israel's control over journalists and images is not new, and is part of a long history of surveillance and appropriation of images that has been affecting not only Palestinians, but also Israeli activists and foreign observers¹³.

⁷ Tina Campt built her methodological and theoretical approach from her research on photography concerning the African diaspora in Europe and the USA. The "intensity" she writes about is deriving from relations of subordination and inequality in Western societies, which also affected visibility of Afrodescendent people.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68423995> (last access on 30/1/2025).

⁹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/another-journalist-killed-in-israeli-attack-in-gaza-death-toll-rises-to-190/3406244> (accessed on 16/1/2025). The International Federation of Journalists documented the killings of 149 journalists until January 2025, see <https://www.ifj.org/war-in-gaza> (accessed on 16/1/2025).

¹⁰ <https://cpj.org/2024/11/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/> (accessed on 28 November 2024).

¹¹ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22436.doc.htm>

¹² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/gaza-un-experts-condemn-killing-and-silencing-journalists> (accessed on 28 November 2024).

¹³ See the movie *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. The control of images is also part of Israeli border control, both "internal" borders in the occupied territories, where soldiers at the checkpoints can check smartphones and cameras, but also "external" borders, where security guards verify the presence of Palestinian traces in travellers' luggage and technological devices. After 7th October, Palestinians' smartphones became objects of

At the same time, images taken by Palestinian journalists in Gaza spread around the world. Social media played an essential role in their diffusion, with journalists posting what they were simultaneously experiencing and documenting. Images of Palestinian suffering in Gaza also reached mainstream media. Newspapers and televisions around the world have accustomed us to watching from a distance the rows of displaced people, the wounded and the dead trapped under rubble, the amputated bodies, the corpses in the streets, but also the weeping women and the despair of those who find themselves survivors despite the death count that the same media have diligently informed us about on a daily basis. Journalists and critics have denounced the way mainstream media have reproduced images of Palestinians as anonymous bodies (Cruciati 2024), numbers that do not actually count, thus producing the trivialisation of horror (Haddad 2024) and the normalisation of the killing of Palestinians “on live broadcast” (Mhawish 2024).

Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1996) wrote about the commodification and the suppression of images as two intermingled dimensions of the cultural appropriation of suffering. While the suppression of images – which the authors attribute to totalitarian states – aims to deny the collective experience of suffering and prevent public witnessing, the commercialization of images – especially through photojournalism – questions the commodification of abuse and atrocities in the era of “disordered capitalism”. According to these authors, the two essential elements of social experience – its collective mode and intersubjective processes – are “reshaped” through the images of suffering, missing the diversity and specificity of local life-worlds. John Berger had made a similar remark when, discussing the public visibility that photographs of the Vietnam war were having in mainstream American newspapers, he had written of images as “evidence of the general human condition” (2013: 33). Rather than exposing the causes of war and suffering, these generalising effects depoliticised visual production and allowed mainstream media to publish them “with impunity”, simultaneously framing them within narratives that supported US war policies.

A long debate has highlighted the inherent ambiguity of images produced in contexts of political violence: on the one hand, photojournalism is deemed to document social suffering, and on the other hand, it reveals not so much its partiality as its very involvement in government policies. Like Susan Sontag (2003) underlined, photography has always accompanied military campaigns, and its selective character trained photographers to choose what to show. It established a regime of visibility that exposed the dead of enemies and hid the faces of deceased compatriots, serving to celebrate the victory of the “right” side. In contemporary wars, and especially since the war in Iraq, digital technology contributed to the “weaponization of the image” in the “military-visual

particular scrutiny by occupation forces in the West Bank, looking for evidence of affiliation or sympathy for Islamist parties in social networks. According to my interlocutors, the presence of Telegram was itself a cause for suspicion because this app was less subject to scrutiny and censorship by the platform itself, as opposed to Meta, which worked to remove and obscure pro-Palestinian contents (Human Rights Watch 2023). Inversely, the use of smartphone cameras by the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints has become a strategy to collect visual material that can be used to intimidate Palestinians, such as the sexual harassment of Palestinian girls who are forced to undress and filmed with the threat of the videos being passed on to their family and community.

complex": first of all, by transforming the Humvee or the tank into the technical support of the moving image (Mirzoeff 2005). Thanks to digital technology and the internet, the professionalism of images has been complemented by new forms of amateur photography as an output of "digital militarism" (Kuntsman, Stein 2015). Owning their personal digital tools, also individual soldiers become producers of images and circulate them. The publication of Abu Ghraib pictures, which featured American soldiers posing while humiliating their captives, demonstrated the ever-shrinking distance between images of suffering and pure *divertissement* (Meloni 2022: 49).

Rebecca Stein has extensively researched on the rising role that smartphone cameras and social media have acquired in the first decades of the twenty-first century in the context of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the unevenly distribution of "digital rights" (AbuShanab 2018, Tawil-Souri 2012), since the second intifada a multitude of actors – the Israeli army, soldiers, settlers, Palestinian and Israeli activists, human rights workers – transformed cameras and networked visuality into political tools. The Israeli state violence has thus become an image subject itself, "now visible from new vantage points – both from the vertical eye of the drone and from the horizontal perspective of its Palestinian targets" (Stein 2021: 159). Shifting her approach from representation to the social life of images in Palestine, the anthropologist maintains that this visual production has shaped a shared "camera dream" that, despite political polarizations, assumes that images can support (different versions of) "justice". Like in the "Arab springs" or Black Lives Matters in the USA, images have been thought as visual evidences of state violence that can produce political change. According to Stein, the imagined link between visual exposure and political rupture, based on the transformation of the image into legal evidence, is not new¹⁴; however, what the Palestinian case shows is that this often ends up as a broken dream.

While Stein's work focusses on visual production, this disillusionment should rather question the processes that underly the formation of audiences. Much has been written about "humanitarian" witnessing and the moral affects, which emerge from watching the images of suffering. Susan Sontag (2003) identified the distance between the viewer and the image subject as "a quintessential modern experience", talking about the privilege of being spectators of faraway suffering thanks to photojournalism and television. Like many have underlined, this privilege is rather declined as a moral attitude, which should produce the viewer's sympathy towards those sufferers, and mobilize action through "global compassion" (Meloni 2022). These moral effects/affects do not contradict the depoliticization of violence through images, as discussed above. On the contrary, the sense of moral inadequacy and impotence accompany this mode of witnessing so that, as Berger puts it, either the viewer "shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance – of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF" (Berger 2013: 33). Rather than habituation or desensitisation in the face of countless images produced by the globalization of suffering, moral witnessing generates a specific mode of feeling that

¹⁴ See visual production as legal expertise to investigate state violence in the work of Forensic Architecture <https://forensic-architecture.org>.

simultaneously shapes a certain type of audience. In the mystification of power relations that the privilege of the viewer produces, impotence and innocence blur: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering" (Sontag 2003).

But what happens when there is no such distance between experience and reporting? Palestinian journalists themselves have become the subject of media attention as survivors who continue to tell the world about the war¹⁵. While Israeli attacks are going on with international support, they have asked what the sense of their work is, if the world keep watching without acting:

You've seen us shedding tears over our loved ones, colleagues, friends and family members. You've seen us killed in every possible way. [...] What more ways should you be seeing us killed in so that you can move and act and stop the hell inflicted upon us? [...] We never stopped to tell you the truth. [...] And we don't know how many journalists should be killed so you can really act and stop Israel's impunity against us¹⁶.

The pain of the gaze encompasses three simultaneous ways of seeing Israeli violence: watching becomes part of inflicted violence, an embodied way of suffering itself, and a form of witnessing. It is where the intrinsic polysemy of testimony condenses in one subjectivity: the third part who observes (*testis*), and the one who experiences and survives violence (*superstes*), coincide (cfr. Fassin 2008). The perspective of the pain of the gaze has been masterfully analysed in the long history of anti-Black racism in the USA. If obliging to witness physical punishments of African fellows was a form of collective punishment used by white owners during the slavery period, in more recent times television started to broadcast scenes of arrests and police brutality against Afro-American people. Elisabeth Alexander noted that this visual frame contributed to build the Americans' "videotaped national memory" based on white supremacy, and Black people's embodied memory of oppression "which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict" (Alexander 1994: 79). Victimisation is conceived here as a form of (political) subjectivation that intertwines impotence and innocence in a very different way than humanitarian witnessing. Testimony emerges from the superposition of embodied ways of seeing violence and being affected by it, bringing vernacular images into "living archives"¹⁷ of enduring collective presence.

The lived lives of Palestinian images

In December 2023 Nabil, a friend of mine and member of the Palestinian family who had hosted me during my fieldwork in the occupied West Bank, sent me some pictures

¹⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/02/middleeast/palestinian-journalists-gaza-world-press-freedom-day-intl-cmd/index.html>, <https://time.com/6343715/israel-hamas-war-journalists-gaza/> (accessed on 16/1/2024).

¹⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4Pj0ELb_4s, see also Mhawish 2024.

¹⁷ I take the expression of "living archive" from Rashid (2025), which defines it as an archive "reluctant to dust and impotence". This definition concerns the photographic project and exposition "Qui resteremo" ("Here we will remain", from a verse of Tawfiq Zayyad's poem), organized in Massa Carrara (Italy) in January 2025.

through Whats App. It was late in the night when I happened to see them, just before switching off my phone and going to sleep. Since October 2023 the effort to avoid watching visual contents regarding Israeli violence against Palestinians has become a practice of care within my family. In different occasions my husband had chosen not to share videos, which he used to receive through the Arab diaspora's social networks. At the same time, regular video calls and messages with friends living in the West Bank kept us abreast of their plight and wider developments in the escalating Israeli violence. In our case avoiding to watch was not an act of voluntary ignorance, but an instinctive way of protecting us from the impact of mediated violence, while being conscious of the privilege of our physical distance from it. When Nabil sent me those photographs that night in December 2023, I missed the chance to look away. Watching the pictures made me nauseous. He had only added a short message: "Maryam's nephew from the village of xxx is a martyr (*shahīd*)".

Maryam is Nabil's brother's wife, and comes from a village where full control passed to Israel after the Oslo Accords. When I was in the field, I had spent countless evenings at their place, where women and men used to gather to chat and drink tea at the end of the day. After watching the photos, I got shocked and confused. I searched for the news in online local newspapers with the pointless aim of providing that dreadful event with a context. And I found the context, which my friend did not need to explain. Yunis, a 16-year-old boy, had been shot during one of the Israeli army's incursions into his village, which had become more frequent after 7th October. He had gone out with other boys to throw stones at the soldiers' jeeps. They had opened fire and he was shot. He had died in the hospital. The day after I received the photos, I wrote my condolences to Maryam and her family.

The core of the first image is the bullet hole in Yunis' neck, at jugular level. The boy is lying on his back, probably on a stretcher. We cannot see his face because it is covered by blue gloves. The bullet hole is so large that we can see the internal matter sprinkled with blood. The dark red blood has soaked his shirt, which has been lifted leaving him almost shirtless. His skin is also streaked with blood. Also red is a cloth lying under his head, maybe his jacket. Finally, half red is the gauze held by one of the blue gloves. There are three blue gloves and one white one. At the top of the photo, they encircle the boy's head like a crown. To the right of the boy's head, the hand holding the gauze is probably trying to stop the flow of blood from the wound. Another blue glove is holding the respirator over his mouth. The other blue glove and the white one are resting on the left side of the torso, perhaps waiting to know what to do. Although the photo was taken when Yunis was still alive, we know that in the end there was nothing more to be done.

The second photograph, which my friend sent me in chat after the first, shows Yunis standing, smiling and looking into the camera. The light in the photograph makes us wonder of a sunny day. He wears jeans and a T-shirt, and poses in front of a stone wall in what is probably his village. Blurred silhouettes of houses can be glimpsed in the background. His young face and fresh smile reveal that he is a teenager. He looks happy. It could be the portrait of any teenager, anywhere in the world. This is the photo that local newspapers published to accompany the news of his killing.

A few months later I mentioned the idea of this article to the friend who had sent me the photos, asking if he would like to talk about it. My friend explained to me it was one of Yunis' family members who took the picture of his last moments in the hospital: "They posted it on Facebook to make the world aware of the crimes of the occupation (*jarām al-iḥtilāl*)". From person to person, via Facebook, the photo could have reached a large number of people. The family sent it to local newspapers, too. Although the picture could have mainly reached a Palestinian audience, my friend said that even Palestinians need to watch it. He said that all Palestinians are exposed to images of killings, since now people use smartphones and social networks: "It is different from the past, when everything was experienced *live*". Although in media language *live* identifies a synchronic mediation of the event, in my friend's words it refers to unmediated lived experience. In his view, the multiplication of images of Palestinian death no longer makes difference to [Palestinian] people (*battal yfraq baynhum*). However, this does not mean people are not affected by these images. This mediation rather creates different "degrees of feeling" (*darājat ash-shu'ūr*). The "intimate gaze" of Yunis' mother and father was obviously affected more than others. He quoted an Arab proverb: "the hand on the fire is not like the beholder" (*al-yd fī-l-nār mish zay illī bitfarraj*). Those who watch are different from those who are burning.

Considering my friend's insights, the pain of the gaze appears to be diverse, socially situated and changes according to the watchers' positioning. Thus, we can connect it to different audiences, that is different modes of relating to images of political violence in Palestine. My friend identifies an intimate way of seeing violence, which concerns the world of personal relations and affects. The boy's pictures affect his parents first of all. Then, there are other Palestinians. To the collective Palestinian body Yunis is a "martyr", his killing represents a political death: images testify to the Israeli necropolitics, which my friend describes in terms of "crimes"¹⁸. Affects play a different role here: the Palestinian public identifies with the injustice of Yunis' death, more than devoting to a general sympathy for him and his family. In a way, political identification is stronger than pity (or, at least, it does not contradict it). Although other Palestinians have not "burnt their hands", they must witness the Israeli violence. This obligation is multifold. On the one side, they are exposed to Israeli violence on a daily basis: this is the sense of my friend's use of *live* as a direct and simultaneous experience of violence, which recalls its persistence in the Palestinian history. On the other hand, they are summoned to witness, they cannot turn away: this form of collective responsibility also defines their political subjectivity. After more than a hundred years of colonial rule, the violence Palestinians see "no longer makes difference". This "indifference" does not presuppose disengagement, but rather implies the double burden of being obliged to watch – witnessing Israeli violence even when it does not directly affect you – and obliging us to watch – testifying to violence to others. This is where the Palestinian public's suffering meets Yunis' family's grief: through the role

¹⁸ The "crimes of occupation" does not only refer to the illegality of the military occupation itself, but to the illegitimacy of the Israeli violence more broadly. The subjective quality of "the occupation" in my friend's words recalls the governmental agency that deploys military and civil control in the West Bank, that is the Civil Administration, which today is part of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit of the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

of testimony that pictures play. In this sense, a supposed split between “private” and “public” affects shifts to the need to preserve the collective memory of Israeli state violence and testify it to the world.

As I have already evoked elsewhere (Pilotto 2023, 2025), images that capture violence in the everyday, and which are produced by those who are part of the victimised group, do not mainly respond to the representative function of documentation. The information – the reconstruction of the context and the details of the event – is not necessarily contained in the image in order that it becomes “evidence” in the legal sense of this term. The picture of Yunis’ fatal wound at the hospital does not reveal who was involved in the clash, by whom he was killed and through what dynamics¹⁹. We could say that the indexicality of Yunis’s photo is limited to the bullet hole in his neck, which is also undoubtedly the *punctum*, as Barthes puts it, of the photo itself – the point that “wounds” the eye. In this sense the image of Yunis’ body testifies to an act of brutal force. Even Nabil does not need to explain what happened: saying that “Yunis is a martyr” is enough.

The Israeli treatment of Palestinian children through imprisonment and killing is well documented. Beside the effects of displacement and shelling during Israel’s war on Gaza, UNICEF reported that one child was killed every two days in the occupied West Bank since 7 October²⁰. The project “Visualizing Palestine”²¹ produced infographics based on research and analysis that show the dynamics of these killings, which seem to be, if not intentional, at least not avoided by the Israeli army (Fig. 3, 4).

Discussing the humanitarian politics of testimony during the second Palestinian intifada, Didier Fassin wrote: “The young boys – they are increasingly younger – who expose their body to the enemy’s bullets offer a dramatic manifestation of the powerlessness of Palestinian society. This imposed figure of male adolescence is the political subject who bears witness to resistance” (Fassin 2008: 542). Fassin argues that the figure of the young boy as a “hero-martyr”²² represents a change in the political subjectivation of Palestinians at that time: “Where the balance of power is profoundly unequal, where negotiation has become impossible, where the nation’s future seems blocked, offering one’s life becomes the ultimate mode of subjectification in the political arena” (*Ibid.*). But is sacrifice really the true mode of political subjectivation of the

¹⁹ Palestinian images that simultaneously capture victim and perpetrator are rarer than those exposing the consequences of Israeli violence, although videos and photos of clashes between the Israeli army and/or settlers and Palestinian civilians, have definitely increased with the advent of new technologies (Stein 2021).

²⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/child-casualties-west-bank-skyrocket-past-nine-months>

²¹ <https://visualizingpalestine.org/>

²² In Arabic language “martyr” (*shahīd*) comes from the verb *shahida*, which means “to witness”, while the Latin etymology of this concept in Christian tradition is *martyr*, from the Greek *martus*, that is “witness”. Talal Asad (2007) has eloquently discussed the link of sacrifice and testimony in Islamic ethics, which goes far beyond suicide bombing as a contemporary phenomenon. It is not my aim here to delve deeper into the historical conceptions of martyrdom in Palestine. However, martyrdom is a key issue in political language, depicting all those who are killed, directly or indirectly, by the political violence of the Israeli occupation. In the Palestinian context this category is not simply based on religion: in fact, Palestinian Christian and Muslim “martyrs” are not differentiated, and their bodies are buried in the “cemeteries of the martyrs”. A genealogy of the concept of martyr seems more urgent than ever where its changing meanings intersect the processes of construction of civil memory in the political theologies of “national liberation”, even in the Western world, like the story of Malga Zonta pictures suggest.

Palestinians in times of escalating violence and war? I guess Yunis's photographs, as well as the sought-after global circulation of images, suggest we should go on a different path.

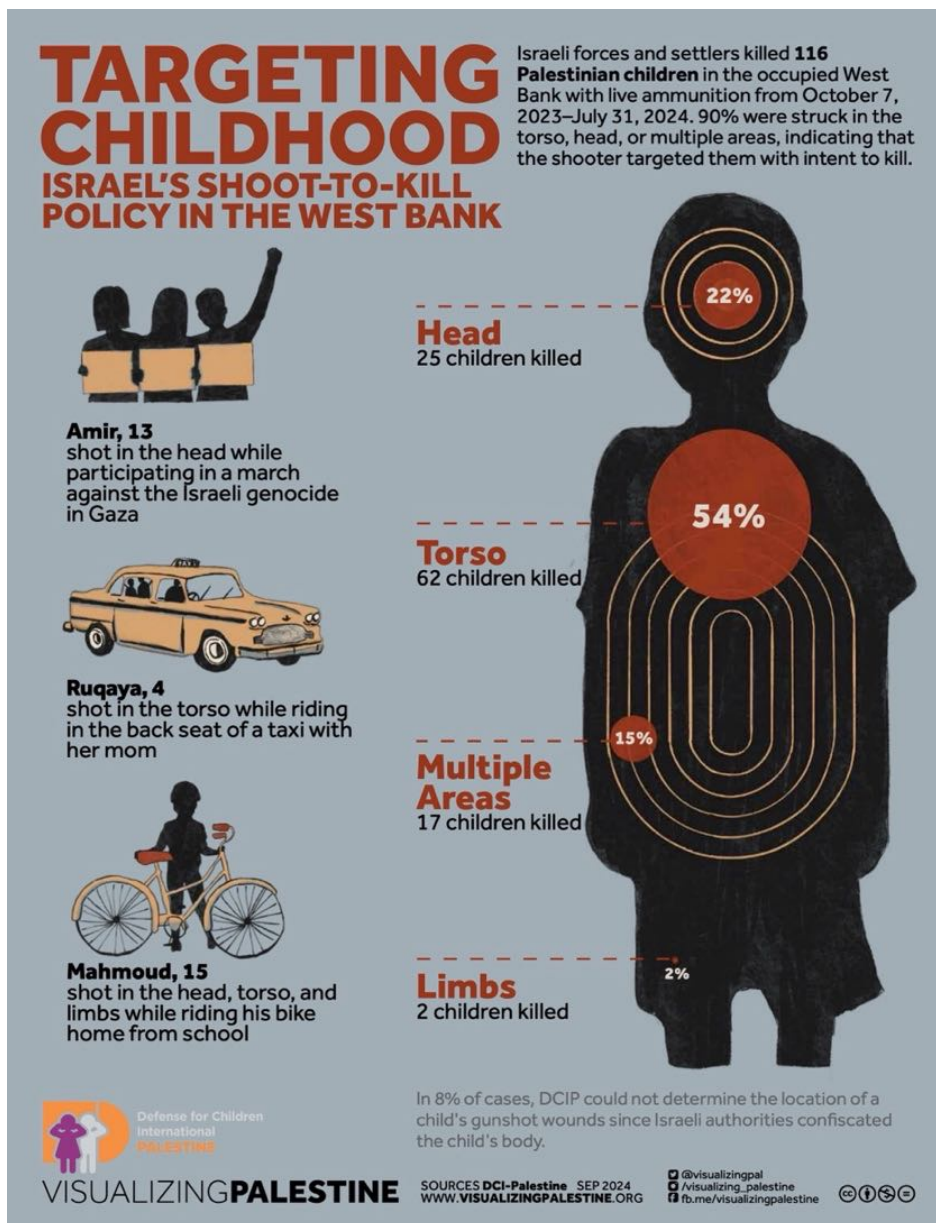


Fig. 3 Targeting Childhood in the West Bank-By Area (Visualizing Palestine)



Fig. 4 Targeting Childhood in the West Bank-By Distance (Visualizing Palestine)

Lori Allen explored the relationship between human rights, visibility, and affect during the second intifada. According to the anthropologist, the circulation of images of Palestinian martyrs in national media was part of a “politics of immediation”, which entails a covert denial of mediation while aiming to produce the immediacy of pain – and sympathy for it. Rooted in human rights discourse, victimization becomes central to Palestinian politics, as the representation of Palestinian suffering “constitutes a particular kind of subject whose rights are seen to arise not from a political status but from the state of (human) nature” (Allen 2009: 163). The public thus emerges through witnessing and emotional participation. For Palestinians, the imagery of death circulating in national media generated a form of “affective intimacy” despite geographic, social, and political fragmentation. For the rest of the world, visceral images act as vehicles for a sense of shared humanity presumed to be pre-social and pre-political – based on a naturalized

notion of “human rights” rooted in the Western humanist and universalist tradition. Allen’s reflections therefore connect the ethical and political dimensions of sacrifice – embodied in the heroization of “martyrs” – to the production of humanity that happens through the sensual link between visuality and affect.

Almost twenty years after the intifada, in an era marked by the genocide of the Palestinian people and the abdication of the Western-based framework of international law and human rights by liberal democracies (Fassin 2025), can we still speak of the same idea of “humanity”? If Palestinians continue to circulate images of their own deaths to denounce their dehumanization, what does the concept of humanity appeal to today? Nabil argues that the photo of Yunis makes the “crimes of the occupation” visible: it is his mortally wounded body that is exhibited as evidence of Israeli state violence. Undoubtedly, the production of such images is embedded in a social context shaped by broader practices of mourning and commemoration – practices that link violence against the individual to the violence inflicted upon the social group to which they belong (Khalili 2007, Latte Abdallah 2022). The connection between individual and collective experience is central to the definition of the “martyr.”

Yet, two figures in this story represent life, not death: those who took the photograph – who remain after Yunis’s death, as does the image they produced – and the smiling Yunis in the second photo. This prompts us to ask: what more is contained in the images of Yunis that we cannot see? Viewed together, the juxtaposition of these images is not merely a celebration of death as testimony, but a testimony to the endurance of Palestinian life under the threat of Israeli necropolitics, which renders the boundary between life and death increasingly unstable. The effect of Israeli settler violence is thus a politics of life that fuses individual and collective existence into a unified project of witnessing – a project aimed at leaving traces of Palestinian presence. If Palestinian images posted on social media are like “bottles thrown into the sea” – as Cécile Boëx (2021) described the videos of the Syrian revolution on YouTube – they are addressed to a virtual audience, summoned to acknowledge Israel’s ongoing genocidal violence. Ultimately, Palestinian images do not relinquish hope – the hope captured in Yunis’s smile.

“Trigger warning”: Israeli images and parody as settler colonial violence

In 2024 I managed to see my friend Amina together with her husband Salim in a city of Europe. The joy of our re-union after many years mixed with grief for Israel’s war in Gaza and worries about the settler expansion in the West Bank. In the course of our bitter conversation, Salim extended his smartphone towards me to show me something. His was a quick and coy gesture, revealing a kind of decency towards those digital contents. What he was showing and hiding at the same time, was a Telegram chat written in Hebrew. Like many Palestinians, Salim can speak and read Hebrew. He explained to me that he had joined some Israeli news groups in order to keep informed. He focused on a couple of pictures shared in the chat: they depicted murdered children lying amidst the rubble in Gaza. Salim pointed at the Israelis’ reactions to these images: “fire” and “like” emojis appeared underneath them, meaning that many of the followers were expressing their

appreciation for the death of Palestinian children. Salim broke our silence only commenting that “there is no humanity”.

Israelis’ exposure of their own violence against Palestinians increased after the IDF’s ground invasion in Gaza, thanks to the videos Israeli soldiers posted on their social media. Although the IDF is supposed to regulate the use of social media by its personnel – especially if this can affect its reputation in the eyes of the public (Toler et al. 2024) – images of Gaza’s destruction and the degrading treatment of Palestinian captives went viral in TikTok, Instagram and other social networks, reaching a wider audience that is not on the battlefield. If we consider the soldiers’ videos as an “audio-logo-visual apparatus”²³, we can identify three main *topoi* that emerge from it: humiliation, destruction and appropriation.

The “humiliation” *topos* results from filming Palestinian men arrested during the military operations in Gaza. Prisoners are usually shown in group, undressed, blindfolded, with their hands tied behind their backs. In some videos we can hear the voice of the soldier filming that mocks the prisoners, emphasising the signs of their fear (such as the trousers wet with urine, on which the camera zooms). The humiliating effect of these images is reinforced by the description of the prisoners as members of Islamist groups, producing a contrast between the “dangerousness” of the “enemies” and the victorious representation of their domination. Images of this kind remind us of the photographs American soldiers took in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib. After their publication, Sontag (2004) underlined: “where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers – recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities”. Through images war violence becomes good entertainment.

The most popular videos are those showing the destruction of Gaza. Many videos reproduce the moment of the explosion of Palestinian houses and buildings, showing soldiers jubilating and celebrating after the detonation. In some films Israeli music provides the soundtrack²⁴. There are many filmed variables of this exultation over destruction. In one [video](#), a soldier knocks on the door of a ruined house, pretending to be surprised that no one is there to open it. In another, goats are filmed frolicking among the rubble, and a smiling soldier says: “As you can see, these are the only uninvolved civilians in Gaza. We are taking care of them. Come here Fatima!”²⁵. The destruction of Palestinian homes is therefore explicitly linked to the elimination of Palestinians. Israeli songs sarcastically accompany [images](#) of Palestinians leaving their homes. In addition to the explosions of buildings, destruction is also deployed in the intimacy of Palestinian

²³ Referring to Michel Chion reflections on audio-vision, Setrag Manoukian wrote about the audio-logo-visual as an “apparatus” conceived as “a network that links a heterogeneous ensemble of institutions, discourses, and techniques, capturing gestures, behaviours, and words of human beings and engendering processes of subject formation” (Manoukian 2010: 239). Manoukian mobilizes the concept of “apparatus” to refer to fractures and casualty in the subject formation, while I go back to the disciplinary dimension of the Foucauldian definition and its reading by Deleuze, where “lines of visibility and enunciation” are tied to “lines of force”, which “rectify” the curves of possible variations (Deleuze 1992).

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/1/18/israeli-soldiers-are-filming-themselves-mocking-palestinians>

homes. Another strand of videos depicts scenes of soldiers inside the houses. The filmed destruction of furniture and interiors goes with the appropriation of Palestinians' personal belongings²⁶.

We can watch Israeli soldiers taking shoes, necklaces and even money, or filming themselves playing with Palestinian children's bicycles or footballs. The "appropriation" strand has a particular twist in the videos showing the appropriation of women's undergarments. This seems to particularly amuse Israeli soldiers. They open drawers and display what they consider to be an "excessive" amount of underwear, commenting on Arabs' "lust". Photos and videos portray them wearing bras and panties over their uniforms, or hanging them on the wall as trophies²⁷. If the "appropriation" strand recalls looting as a consolidated practice of domination in the settler colonial history of Palestine, the hyper-sexualization of "Arabs" and "Muslims" is also part of Orientalist fantasies combining the sexual humiliation and dehumanization of "others" (Massad 2007). Furthermore, the soldiers' videos transform the war ground in a playground, normalizing violence as fun to be consumed by social media followers.

This digital video production, made possible by soldiers' smartphones as polymedia (Madianou 2014), oils the "audio-logo-visual apparatus" of Israel's war on Gaza. A key feature of this mechanism is the specific narrative style of the videos, which is based on mockery of Palestinians. This style probably does not derive from the current period of war in Gaza, but it certainly stimulates a circular video production, moving seamlessly from the war camp to Israeli civil society. For example, a video showing Palestinian prisoners blindfolded, tied up and sitting on the ground, forced to listen for hours to a children's song in Hebrew, has become a trend among social media users. Ordinary citizens started filming themselves blindfolded, pretending to have their hands tied, with the same song as a soundtrack. Many of these [videos](#) were filmed by family members during daily life, involving children as well. In this way the mockery of Palestinian suffering becomes a parody. In literature parody consists of an imitation of the style of a particular writer or school of writers, usually with the aim of mocking it, producing a caricatural and humorous effect. The multiple remakes of soldiers' audio-visual narrative contribute to reinforce emotional detachment from the victimization of Palestinians, transforming it into "a song sung alongside another" (that is the literary translation of the Greek word *parōidia*).

Along the continuum of mockery, ordinary Israelis' videos generate also their own narrative *topoi*. The exposure of the Israeli privilege is one of them: [some people](#) film themselves standing with the tap running continuously, or turning the lights on and off in their homes. These images make obvious reference to the lack of water and electricity in Gaza as a consequence of war. The footage of the interiors of Israeli homes and their facilities also stands in stark contrast to the videos of soldiers destroying the interiors of Palestinian houses emptied of their inhabitants. The abundance of water and electric light available demonstrate the successful appropriation of Palestinian livelihood. A second

²⁶ A reservist confirmed that destruction out of specific "military reasons" were largely part of the IDF's operations in Gaza, see <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/01/middleeast/israeli-soldier-alleges-serious-misconduct-gaza-intl/index.html>

²⁷ <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/02/violating-intimacies/>

topos went viral: [Israelis disguised](#) as Palestinians dance and smile in front of the camera. The disguise usually consists of covering the head with a scarf similar to a keffiyah or a hijab, joining the eyebrows with a pencil mark, and painting a few teeth black. What is thus mocked in these videos is a different corporeality, mixing phenotypic traits, clothing and socio-economic conditions. Disguise thus becomes a practice of racialisation that represents Palestinians as poor and different, and therefore inferior. The intertwining of racism and classism becomes more apparent if we compare this type of videos with the celebration of the destruction of Palestinian life and the ostentation of Israelis' well-being contained in the videos discussed above. Parody is built on the Israelis' political imagination concerning "Arabs", which caricatures orientalist and miserabilist representations of colonized Palestinians.

In addition, the visual material being parodied are the very images that Palestinians produce to denounce Israeli state violence. Israelis' videos showing candles lit in the dark and taps from which no water comes out tell of living conditions in Gaza, and reverses the *topos* of the ostentation of Israeli's access to water and electricity. In a [video](#) posted on TikTok, an Israeli influencer with a keffiyeh on her head worn as a hijab, holds a mango wrapped in swaddling clothes like a baby in her arms. She cradles it with a contrite face, repeating in Arabic: "Ya ibnī!" (Oh my son!). When a voice-over shouts "cut!", she throws the mango over her shoulder and giggles as recorded applause breaks out. She then explains what ingredients are used to falsify the signs of Palestinian suffering: ketchup for blood and talcum powder for the rubble dust. The figure of the Palestinian mother is thus represented as the core of the "fiction" of Palestinian grief. The sarcasm of Israeli visual contents, which accompany the staging of Palestinian suffering with smiles, dances, music and theatrical gestures, is supposed to attribute the explicit artificiality of Israeli parody to the Palestinians' suffering itself. In this way, mocking results to be a further mode of dispossession that denies not only the Palestinians' grief, but also their victimization and the "global compassion" their images possibly raise in the international public arena. At the same time, if we look at the Israelis' audio-visual production and narrative *topoi* as a whole, the denial of Palestinian suffering contrast – but maybe does not contradict – the amusement for destruction, displacement and humiliation of Palestinians, which soldiers' videos from Gaza unequivocally show.

As Rebecca Stein (2021a, 2021b) showed, the accusation of fraudulence and media manipulation by Palestinians spread among Israeli extreme-right groups but soon became a governmental discourse. The Israeli "repudiation script" started with the footage of 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Durrah, shot while being trapped with his father in a crossfire between the Israeli army and Palestinian gunmen in Gaza on 30 September 2000, at the beginning of the second Intifada. At this time the term "Pallywood" was introduced into the Israeli public discourse to refer to the supposed tactical theatrics and staged news for propaganda of the Palestinian film production. Since images of Israeli state violence against Palestinians were still rare at that time, the military had to give explanations (and initially excused) since the filmed killing of Mohammed Al-Durrah risked to damage Israel's image and public relations on an international level. While the repudiation of indigenous claim has an established colonial history, Stein explored how

the Israeli “repudiation script” reinforced in the smartphone era, given the multiplication of images and their facilitated circulation. The script started involving digital experts, military courts and media campaigns. It also expressed the growing conflict between right-wing settlers, and Israeli activists and human rights groups that contributed to producing visual evidences of Israeli violence against the Palestinians. As Stein wrote, “the charge of videographic inauthenticity worked by banishing all traces of military violence from the original incident” (Stein 2021a: 79). The more the Israelis’ accusations gained terrain in the public discourse, the more Israeli state violence became invisible, until being completely denied. In 2012 a state commission convened by Prime Minister Netanyahu on the al-Durrah case, concluded that the boy wasn’t really killed (Stein 2021b). The clinical eye of Israeli experts focuses in particular on the filmed moment of the death: they scrutinize the movements after the shooting, the way the bodies fall, the blood that appears or does not appear. Ultimately, the fakeness of Palestinian videos is encapsulated in the ways Palestinians die. The “repudiation script” ends up denying the Palestinians’ death.

This is what Israeli influencers also convey during Israel’s war on Gaza in 2023-2024, confirming the popularization of the “repudiation script” in the contemporary Israeli society. Parody seems to be a further development of it. In literature, one of the main features of parody is that it presupposes that the public knows the original in order to be able to laugh at its distortion. So, the author and the public share a cultural background. In his famous interpretation of parody, Bakhtin underlined how in popular culture between XIV and XVI centuries, parody became a form of social critique against dominant discourses and institutions. He also underlined that its subversive function did not aim to destroy the original, but to create a “dialogic relation” with a supposedly “regenerative function” that opens up for social change. In the parody of Israelis’ videos, only supporters of Israel can laugh, revealing how cultural intimacy is based on settler colonial imageries and populist nationalism. The cultural intimacy associated with national belonging, which Herzfeld (1997) identified with feelings of pride and embarrassment – respectively linked to the internal dynamics of a society and its relations with the outside world – seems unbalanced in this case on the virile display of pride and domination. This “culture of shamelessness” (Sontag 2004) reveals Israel’s supporters’ “moral abdication” (Fassin 2025). What has parody become in the age of digital capitalism? It certainly lost the hope for change that put the contestation of power asymmetries at its core, as Bakhtin interpreted it. The Zionist-Western parody aims to reinforce the domination system based on “technological innovation”, media control, settler expansion and the overtly claimed inequality of human lives. Epistemic violence goes unruly (Salih 2023). The rest of the world has little left to laugh at.

“Trigger warning: some readers may find details of this report disturbing. Discretion is advised” reads the beginning of an article on the Israelis’ mockery of Palestinians through social media²⁸. Violence remains a debated visual field. Established news networks have

²⁸ <https://www.wionews.com/world/israel-hamas-war-social-media-scrambles-to-scrub-spoof-videos-mocking-palestinians-651829>

mainly focused on the Israeli soldiers' videos from Gaza²⁹, others also brought attention to social media users' "spoof videos" and the netizens' widespread backlash³⁰. Anyway, this kind of videos continue to circulate in the social media. Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit built a database of audio-visual contents and produced a [film](#) on Israel's "war crimes" thanks to the thousands of photos and videos posted online by Israelis. In the film, the director Richard Sanders comments:

No one can say they didn't know, the Israelis could not have made it clearer to us what they were doing in their rhetoric social media they were posting and what their own media were saying, that this was an exercise in ethnic cleansing, quite possibly an exercise in genocide, they were making it abundantly clear to us. And if we are ignorant, we are wilfully ignorant.

On 11th January 2024, in the public sitting at the International Court of Justice, South Africa's lawyers made reference to six of the Israeli soldiers' videos (one was screened during the hearing), which had already been published in mainstream media such as BBC and Aljazeera English. Framed as a proof of "intent from genocidal speech", the prosecution read: "Israeli soldiers in Gaza were filmed dancing, chanting and singing in November [2023]: 'May their village burn; may Gaza be erased'. There is now a trend among the soldiers to film themselves committing atrocities against civilians in Gaza, in a form of "snuff" video" (ICJ 2024: 36). And he concluded: "Soldiers obviously believe that this language and their actions are acceptable because the destruction of Palestinian life in Gaza is articulated state policy" (ivi, p. 37). From the perspective of international law, the Israelis' videos become legal evidence and their parodic nature loses its jovial tone, ultimately revealing itself as a form of dehumanization that testifies to the horror of Israel's war crimes. At the same time, their circulation on social media also bears witness to Israel's ongoing impunity before the world.

Final remarks. Humanity and resistance in the pain of the gaze

In November 2024 my friend Nabil sent me a video, which he had filmed from the roof of a house under construction in his family's neighbourhood. The video offered a 360-degree view of his village, half of which was unilaterally annexed to Jerusalem in the early 90s. What we can see in the video is not only the village where Nabil lives, but also the high-rises of West Jerusalem advancing towards the village and the Israeli settlements built in the Palestinian land, so close that we cannot distinguish where the village ends and the settlements begin. There is a background noise throughout the video, first metallic, then like hammering, which gives the idea that someone is building something nearby. This overview of almost two minutes ended with the image of Nabil's home, on which he zoomed. The video was a kind of nostalgic postcard he sent me from the place where we had spent so much time together. He wrote: "Here is the image of the village.

²⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html>, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/02/violating-intimacies/>, <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/catherine-cornet/2024/05/21/guerra-gaza-tiktok>

³⁰ <https://screenshot-media.com/politics/human-rights/israel-palestine-trend-controversy>, <https://x.com/AJEnglish/status/1720158775418433643>,

There's the noise of a machine today, they are demolishing a house". His "postcard" was therefore affectively charged with a greater value, that of home, in a context where Palestinian homes are constantly being destroyed.

The threat of disappearing is at the core of Palestinian lives in Gaza and the West Bank. In last years, both mainstream and independent media mainly focused on reporting the enormous impact of Israel's war in the Strip. The ceasefire negotiated in mid-January 2025 did not prevent Israel to launch the "Iron Wall" operation in the northern West Bank to eliminate armed resistance and further destroy Palestinian refugee camps. Presented as a war on terrorists, Israeli claims of annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories are fuelled by Trump's proposition to transfer "poor" homeless Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt and Jordan. The mission of reconstructing Gaza, which is envisaged in the third step of the ceasefire negotiations, enhances Zionist-American fantasies of settler colonial domination. Destruction and reconstruction, as Ariella Azoulay (2011, 2015) had already highlighted, are at the core of Israel's politics of devastation of the Palestinian life. Demolitions of homes and the destruction of Palestinians' livelihoods (water pools, animals, olive trees...) are widely documented by Palestinians' and other activists' cameras. The movie *No other Land*, which gained critical acclaim in numerous festivals worldwide, shows what Rebecca Stein has defined the broken dream of video testimony. While exposing Palestinian popular resistance to ongoing Israeli house demolitions and settler violence, the movie – whose shooting ended in October 2023 – concludes with the bitter realisation that part of the Palestinian villages of Masfar Yatta in the southern West Bank have been completely depopulated.

However, the Palestinians' camera dream does not end. Its ambition to document the truth of Israeli state violence and settler expansion is not the only aim. As I attempted to highlight in this article, the role of testimony of Palestinian images is not limited to denounce Israeli necropolitics, but also to affirm Palestinian existence. The pictures of Yunis remind us of what Roland Barthes wrote about photography as "the anthropological place of death", where "the dead returns". His specific reference to photographs of corpses led him to write: "if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of the dead thing" (Barthes 1981: 79). This shift from the present (the moment we watch) to the past ("this-has-been") is possible because "someone has seen the referent [...] in *flesh and blood*" (*Ibid.*). These considerations highlight the role of testimony that images can play, like Malga Zonta pictures, which also kept the mother's pain alive. Instead of leaving them hidden in a drawer like Cattinella, the Palestinians throw them out into the world, hoping that one day they may become part of the memory of a world that recognises the injustice enclosed in their suffering. The twenty-two short films collected in the movie *From ground zero* by the Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, painfully show how Palestinian life endures even under the rubble of bombarded homes in Gaza. "No", the short film realized by the Gazan journalist Hana Awd Eleiwa, refuses to include the Palestinian suffering in the visual frame, and joins the music group [Sol Band](#) to sing Palestinian songs together with children in the streets of Gaza. The Palestinian camera dream cannot end, because the testimony it bears keeps both joy and pain being alive.

Commenting on Sontag's work after the publication of the photos of Abu Ghraib, Judith Butler highlighted the importance of recognising images as being able to interpret events and not only convey affects. "Visual frames" do not merely represent something, but also determine the limits of representability, that is what can be seen. Thus, Butler asks, when does one see the framing of the frame? This does not depend only on media, but on "the structuring effects that certain larger norms [...] have on what we provisionally call 'reality'" (Butler 2009: 74). Picking up on Levinas' thought, she argues that these norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. So, frames govern the perceptible as far as some portion of the visual field is ruled out: "In other words, the image, which is supposed to deliver reality, in fact withdraws reality from perception" (ivi, p. 75). These reflections are part of Butler's wider effort to ask which lives are grievable. Visual framing has to do with the inequality of life, first of all establishing the power of framing itself. We could reformulate Butler's question and ask: when does one see the violence of the framing?

As I attempted to show, the link of the representability and grievability of Palestinian lives is entrenched in the Zionist settler colonization of Palestine, which aims to replace Palestinian indigenous people with the "heirs" of the Biblical land of Israel. "This is my home" is the Israeli song that accompanies many videos of Israelis mocking the Palestinians' absence from their homes. Israel as militarized settler society creates a continuum of narrative and visual *topoi* alongside derision of Palestinian suffering, appropriating Palestinian images to parody them. Except as humiliated captives, Palestinians are eliminated from the Israeli frame, and replaced with Israelis playing racialized caricatures of colonized "Arabs". The parody of the "plausible genocide" of Palestinians aims to convey that "a genocide is not a genocide" (Fassin 2024, Hage 2010). The Israeli framing does not only dispossess Palestinians from their own grief, but also robs audiences from the pain of the gaze. Ultimately, the Israeli parody itself becomes evidence of the genocidal intent.

If Palestinian images attempt to frame Israeli violence, Israeli images make the violence of their framing imperceptible. My reference to "Palestinian" and "Israeli" visuality and social media circulation does not mean to rely on nationalist references or identity politics – although national and identity discourses cross the visual field in polarizing ways. Rather, Palestine/Israel refers to the asymmetric power of defining what can be included in the visual frame throughout the colonial history of Palestine. Relying on my Palestinian friends' appeal to the "humanity" of the gaze, I consider pain as the condition to acknowledge both the Israeli violence and the Palestinians' joys and suffering. According to Nabil, Amina, Samir and Yunis's family, "humanity" is what makes the difference in the multiplicity of publics, which emerge from the circulation of images and knowledge about Palestine/Israel. In this sense "humanity" does not concern a general feeling of sympathy, based on an abstractly shared human condition, nor another normative frame that hierarchically differentiate full "humans" from "human animals". Humanity rather depends on the resistance of the pain of the gaze – that is the ability to see violence both in the frame and in the framing, and to keep celebrating and grieving Palestinian lives.

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photo-essays

Photographic juxtapositions: taking pictures across borders and life-worlds

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-182

Abstract

The article presents a collaborative exploration of Mohamed Keita's photographic juxtapositions. Grounded in the dialogic nature of our encounters, it reflects on the affective power of images to connect people and life-worlds – including the photographer and the anthropologist themselves. Images thus emerge as sites of encounter between situated ways of seeing, taking into account but also transcending a dichotomic approach to borders and power asymmetries between places and viewers. Rather than merely representing reality, Mohamed Keita's photographs seem to express the existential condition of the *tonkaranké* – a way of living and seeing the world that intertwines displacement, adventure, and a sense of being out of place. The article outlines the collaborative methods that shaped this reflexive engagement with images and experiments with a mode of writing that seeks to convey the affective resonances and preserved autonomy of the selves involved in the collaboration. In the second part of the article, ten photographic juxtapositions are presented, each accompanied by extended captions and key titles, to foreground the shared visual and affective dimensions they evoke.

Keywords

Photography, juxtaposition, Africa, Italy, presence, affects, *tonkaranké*

The author

Born in Côte d'Ivoire, Mohamed Keita was forced to flee his country at the age of fourteen. He began a three-year journey and arrived in Italy in 2010. He attended various courses, including at Exusphoto School and the Rossellini Institute of Cinema and Television. He now collaborates with several associations, foundations, and schools such as Action for Children in Conflict, Fondazione Pianoterra, Fondazione Paolo Bulgari, and his photographic work has been exhibited both in Italy and abroad. He has received several awards, including the "Young/Old Photographer" prize at the PhC-CapalbioFotografia Festival (2015), the SUFA "Stand Up For Africa" project award (2019), and the Best Photographer award from the Universities Network for Children in Armed Conflict (2021). In 2017 he founded Studio KENE, a permanent photography workshop in Mali.

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In June 2023 Chiara invited Mohamed to take part in a workshop entitled “Imaginaries of freedom and resonances of images”, which she organized with Bruno Riccio at the University of Bologna. She contacted Mohamed after discovering his photographs in different websites, including his own (www.mohamedkeita.it). In his public profiles he was presented as an Ivorian guy who had fled from civil war in his country and sought asylum in Italy. Living in Rome, he had started to take pictures also thanks to the support of various associations and social projects in the city. Despite his public presentation in the net, his photographs do not deal with migrations, war or refugees explicitly. From the very beginning, Chiara was struck by Mohamed’s pictures, especially for their obliquity: they show and hide at the same time, leaving you with a sense of mystery, or doubt, and providing questions rather than answers. Moreover, Mohamed’s oblique gaze rests on the ordinary. His pictures capture images of daily life both in Italy and in Africa: street views, people passing by, non-human elements such as animals, water, smoke. When we started meeting, we established to focus only on his photographic work, which Mohamed sees as very personal and very “general” at the same time – images concern his biographical trajectory but also the wider human experience.

After his participation at the workshop in Bologna, we decided to co-write this photo-essay. We agreed to discuss and exchange some drafts in Italian, and Chiara rearranged the final version of the essay in English. From October 2023 to May 2024 we regularly met online to discuss the photographic juxtapositions that he had created for his presentation at the workshop. These were ten couples of pictures, which he had decided to place side by side to be shown to the participants in Bologna’s workshop. Our online encounters consisted in reflecting upon the associations of images and to focus on the relationship that each association could evoke. The dialogic setting of our encounters was accompanied by the simultaneous visualisation of the photographic juxtapositions through the screen sharing of our video calls. Although this process of sharing views was essentially dialogic and plural, Mohamed – as the photographer – started commenting the pictures and explained his choices for juxtaposition. He gave his first input and then Chiara followed with her insights on the images and his comments, so that our conversation became a sort of mutual exchange. However, Mohamed also liked changing this approach and asked Chiara to express her impressions first. Ultimately, our shared reflections on his photographic juxtapositions became also a new way to conceive the sense of these associations themselves.

Etymologically, “juxtaposition” means to place different things side by side. Even in linguistics, this concept does not express a relation of opposition or subordination; rather, the juxtaposed elements preserve their own form, function and meaning. Therefore, juxtaposition does not produce fusion. Despite this preserved autonomy of the juxtaposed elements, juxtaposition has the power to create connections between them – what John Berger defined as a kind of “authority”: “the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes after it” (Berger 1972: 29). This combination of the image’s autonomy and the image’s ability to create connections, is particularly telling about Mohamed’s photographic associations, but also about our way to work together. In fact, this power of connection that the photographic

juxtapositions engender, had also to deal with our various and multi-layered positionings. Mohamed is the photographer: the author's authority was supposed to give priority to his own words on his work. However, in our encounters this was not always given for granted as a "method" for working together, and sometimes the roles were reversed – Mohamed let Chiara speak first. In his renowned book *La Chambre Claire*, Roland Barthes (1981: 9) stated that photography can be the object of three practices ("or of three emotions, or of three intentions"): to do, to undergo, to look. These three practices correspond to three different figures: the photographer ("the Operator"), the photographed subject ("the Spectrum"), and ourselves who look at the photos ("the Spectator"). For the purpose of our work, ours could only be a dyadic relation between the Operator and one Spectator. Mohamed's photographic subjects concern his repeated journeys between Italy and Africa, but also his personal experience of mobility, which led him to inhabit different worlds simultaneously. Chiara never visited the African countries where many of his pictures were taken. We know border regimes have had, and have, a different impact on our respective lives. "Every image embodies a way of seeing. [...] Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our way of seeing" (Berger 1972: 10). Recalling one of Mohamed's main ideas on his photography, we could say that even our shared work combined the "personal" and the "general" in our juxtaposed ways of seeing. The social and political conditions that have defined and shaped our encounter, also established the power of our joint connections around Mohamed's photographic juxtapositions.

We have never talked about the "meaning" of his visual associations: one thing we tacitly agreed upon was a sort of refusal (or impossibility) to grasp Mohamed's work through the prism of representation. Rather, we reflected upon what the feminist visual theorist Tina Campt has defined as the "affective resonances" of images in her research on African diaspora (Campt 2012, 2017, cf. Shouse 2005). From another perspective, Roland Barthes wrote about the distinction between *studium* and *punctum* as different ways to relate to a picture. According to Barthes' words, we could say that this distinction relies upon different forms of conscience. *Studium* is governed by a "sovereign conscience" (Barthes 1981: 26), which pertains to the domain of culture and representation; it refers to a general interest for the image, without any particular intensity, that ends up coinciding with the photographer's intentions. On the contrary, *punctum* refers to an "affective conscience" (Barthes 1981: 55): Barthes describes it as an "arrow", a "prick", a "wound". *Punctum* is a detail that is there, in the picture, but it is there unintentionally, so it belongs to the domain of contingency – what the French semiologist conceives as an ontological dimension of photography. So, the photographer's ability is not so much the ability of seeing, but the ability of "being there": "Every photography is a certificate of presence" (Barthes 1981: 87).

Barthes' notion of *punctum* and Campt's reference to "affective resonances" help us to explain what kind of work we tried to do with Mohamed's photographic juxtapositions. This work has had a double implication, concerning both the association of photos and our shared commitment to them. First, the photographic juxtapositions precisely evoke fortuity, not only linked to the images' birth, but also to their later

combination. This is very clear in all the couples of photographs. For example, in the juxtaposition n. 1 "Transitions", smoke is an obviously evanescent element that has been captured by Mohammed's gaze, both as dust in an unpaved road in Kenya after the passage of a lorry, and on a film set in Rome. In the juxtaposition n. 4 "Retrospectives", we can focus on the cat's and the girl's look respectively, but a further detail in the right-side frames both the pictures: we can see a man sitting on a bench and a naked child, who are in the background. They seem to be far, little presences, which notwithstanding are there. So, the juxtapositions attest Mohamed's presence in those places and also the time of his passage.

Second, *punctum* or "resonance" as a sensitive and affective experience guided our mutual exchange about the photographic juxtapositions. Hanging between Mohamed's images of Africa and Italy, we discussed about impressions rather than about intentions, about lived lives rather than social and political situations, about the viewer's power to *add* rather than to read ("Punctum is an addiction: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*", Barthes 1981: 55). It was easy to follow this path, because this approach was already inherent to Mohamed's process of creating his own juxtapositions: Africa/Italy, Black/White, Human/Nature, etc. had not been the categories that led to make the associations dichotomously. The process of association follows a different logic that we attempt to highlight in this writing through an ensemble of comments and captions, without necessarily searching for discursive coherence. Ultimately, these may not be considered as "ethnographic descriptions" according to standard anthropological representations, but they rather aspire to offer ethnographic *insights* into people's daily life and the ways of seeing it. In this sense pictures do not accompany words: rather, words precariously attempt to share our differently situated but converging resonances around those images. For this reason, our writing here below, which tries to render pieces of our exchanges, is possibly chaotic. It keeps shifting from the third person to the first one in order to show the co-presence of the general/analytical and the personal/affective dimensions of this writing. We do not use inverted commas to distinguish who said what in direct speech, the "I" is both undefined and suggested through the speaker's name put between brackets.

Mohamed stresses the very personal character of his work, which he says "starts from myself and not from the camera". Given my personal experiences and my mobility between Africa and Italy, I (Mohamed) sometimes feel lost between my previous life and the actual one, and also future looks unpredictable... However, the chance to work with images helps me to live in different places and experience different things simultaneously. Images become a meeting point that makes me feel good. Sometimes I think I stay on a border, permanently. I was born in Africa and now live in Europe, and I live mentally and sometimes physically between these two continents, which are both parts of my life path. It is difficult, and you need to find something which you can cling to. So, the camera has become my best friend, images are my travelling companions... Until I breathe, the journey goes on, like it is for anyone of us.

The dichotomic character of Mohamed's photographic juxtapositions is, however, not deriving from a simple duplicity of the worlds he crosses. In some cases, the

juxtaposed pictures concern the same place or the same country. In my (Chiara's) view, Mohamed's different experiences of mobility across borders and boundaries, and his personal approach to visual "writing" – as he defines photography – grants a special sensibility to his association of images. I (Mohamed) like that in an image one can feel the different elements that compose the frame: my presence, the subject, the place, and the camera, which let me write through my eyes and observation. I do not take pictures of places where others live, but I take pictures of my life where I live. At the same time the image must not talk about me, but about my experience of visibility. Photography should not be only the image – a nice image – but should say something to me. In a way I (Chiara) think that Mohamed's work spontaneously undermines the authority of gaze and the hierarchies of places, which often link aesthetic norms with the social aim of photography conceived as documentation, such as in the reportage genre. It is not the photographer of one place (the Global North, for instance) that goes and look into *other* realities (the Global South, for example) to show images once back home. Usually, as Mohamed highlights, this kind of images must not only tell something about *the others'* life (especially *the others'* suffering), but should also be *beautiful* images that follow the aesthetic canons of professional photography – otherwise, they would not find a public and a market. This often creates a paradox (but is it such?): images often expose people and bodies that are *beautifully* represented in their suffering. In this (Chiara's) sense, I (Mohamed) think that images of Africa are very often dishonest: through them people know only about ordeals.

On the contrary, when I take a picture I do not want to intrude into people's life. If we want to tell about people, we don't need to look only at people, we can also tell about them through non-human life, there's nature, and the contexts in which people live. This is maybe a lighter way... For instance, the juxtaposition n. 2 "Disappearances" shows two images of plants growing in the water. The second picture was taken in the lagoon of Venice, the first one near the river Niger in Bamako. In Bamako I was going around with the children attending the course of photography organized by Studio Kene (<https://studiokene.org/>), we wanted to take pictures of people fishing, swimming or doing their laundry by the river. I chose not to take pictures of people, I preferred to look at the little plant that was growing in the water. Anyway, plants represent life, and water, too. Chiara says my photography is evocative rather than representative: yes, it pushes you to ask questions, it does not aim to explain things. And this can lead different people to see different things in that same image, even *this* is not bad... Then, things can look the same in the images, but are very different instead: the little tree in the lagoon was put there by people, but the plant in the river Niger has grown there by itself. Like in the photographic juxtaposition n. 1, where in both pictures we see smoke: I like showing details and not the totality of things, showing how things can be different but also similar in shape, like people. Even places can be very far from each other, but similar things can happen in them.

At the same time, I am very interested in contrasts. In the photographic juxtapositions n. 3 "Contrasts" and n. 4 "Retrospectives", there are both similarities and contrasts. In the pictures of feet of people laying on the ground, we are in the same city,

Rome. Both lives are on the pavement, but these lives are completely different from each other: someone cannot have a roof overhead, and the other can marry. A life collapses and the other begins. Personally, the question of contrasts pushes me to tell things through photography: there are many, and we can choose to show the ones we want. A pavement is where everything meets in a city, it's a part shared by anyone. It also says what represents whom. And I am also part of the picture, can you see me? I am in the gesture of avoiding to expose faces, in order to preserve people's dignity, to protect people from their own images. I usually take picture with a 50 mm camera and never use telephoto: you are one meter and half or two meters from the subject, so you are in contact with her. Then you have to move like a cat, do things but never think you are alone, leave space to the other, where her reality is. I like street photography because it shows nuances. I don't like showing these nuances only in a tragic way, there's also cheerfulness. In the photographic juxtapositions of the woman with the cat and the young girl with the mirror, the combination is based on the double sight back-front. The hair of the cat is similar to the woman's hair, and the cat seems to say to me: "What are you doing?".

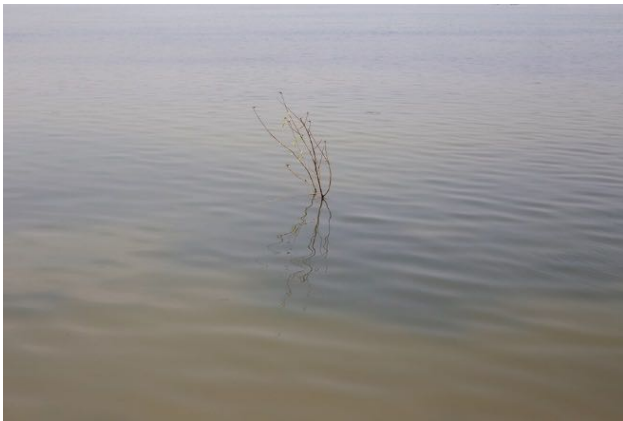
I (Chiara) think that Mohamed's photos also question different ways of relating to images. In the photographic juxtaposition n. 5 "Journeys" and n. 6 "Dreams", the main subject seems to be, respectively, the touristic images of Rome and the portraits of Bob Marley and Ghaddafi printed on people's shirts. The couple of pictures concerning "touristic" Rome is completely different from the one representing people's feet in the same city. It entails a relationship with the image of the city, not with its lived life. At the same time, I (Mohamed) show the back of a horse: what interests me is to evoke other presences that we cannot see, like the person who took the horse there, for instance. Furthermore, not only people travel, but also images. They may cross borders in imperceptible ways, there's no control at the borders. This is also why nowadays there's so much attention to control the circulation of images, especially in certain contexts (Chiara says). Mohamed believes that, no matter how much you try to control them, images eventually get out - whether you want it or not. The images of Bob Marley and Ghaddafi show how they are powerful symbols for African people until today, and move with people on the move.

The circulation of the images is thus inseparable from human mobility. Today we use to talk about refugees and *exilés*, we are overwhelmed by images that are supposed to represent this human reality. In Mandinka and Bambara there is a word that is hardly translatable in European languages. The word is *tonkaranké*, coming from *tonka* which means "outside". So, *tonka-ranké* refers to someone who is "outside", out of her home, maybe out of her city of origin. Mohamed says that the word *exilés* in French cannot give the same idea, because it refers to those who are out of their "home", but this "home" is conceived only as the "homeland" of the nation state. *Tonkaranké* refers to a wider experience of mobility that any way implies displacement, adventure and the feeling of being out-of-place (cfr. Chapatte 2022). Following Berger's insights, *tonkaranké* could also recall a precisely situated way of seeing the world. Hanging between presences and absences, Mohamed's photographic juxtapositions are certainly a means to embody and express this precarious but vital way of embodying and inhabiting multiple life-worlds.



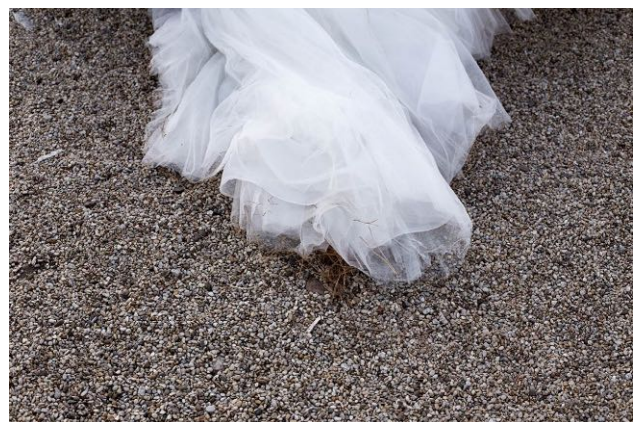
Photographic juxtaposition n. 1 Transitions

These two photos represent smoke and dust. The first was taken in Rome, near the Colosseum, during a walk in the city centre. Suddenly, I noticed this smoke that caught my attention: from a distance, you couldn't really tell what it was. It looked like smoke from a fire, but it was actually coming from a film set. The second one was taken in Thika, Kenya, during a photo excursion with the guys who were participating in a photography workshop I was holding. We were on a road, which crossed a cultivated field, when a lorry sped past us: what I was interested in photographing was not the lorry, but the traces it left as it passed, with all the dust it raised. What interests me is to show details, not the totality of things. Through these details, this seeing-not-seeing that the two images evoke, I like to point out similarities: things can be different, but also similar in form. In the first photo the smoke, lit from below, becomes visible and illuminates the night, while in the second picture the dust momentarily obscures the landscape. In both there is a sense of suspension and the same upward movement of light matter. In their fixity, however, these images show the fleeting nature of the moment in which the photo was taken: after a while the dust will return to the ground and the smoke will vanish. The gaze captures the moment precisely because of that attention to details, to the movement of things, to transience and passage: despite its immobility, the photographic image paradoxically shows a reality that is alive and in the constant process of becoming.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 2 Disappearances

The first photo was taken in Samaya, on the Niger River in Mali. Seeing this solitary branch in the middle of the water was like witnessing a spectacle of nature. Observing this ability to generate life, even in unexpected spaces, I reflected on how much we can learn from nature. The other photo was taken in Venice. From a distance, it looked like a tree growing in the middle of the sea; in reality, it was a passing signal for ships, positioned by human beings. Different from the photograph taken on the Niger River, this image highlights an artificial rather than a natural element. The solitude of these plants in the water, albeit in very different contexts, made me think of the effort to survive. Life involves disappearing, to survive you have to find the balance: there are things you suffer, but there are always people who endure throughout history. To tell the story of people's experience, one must not only look at the human world, there is also nature, the environments in which people live. In the photo of the Niger River, I was there with the guys training at Studio Kené in Bamako, we were doing some outdoor photography exercises: at the river there were people bathing, fishing and doing laundry. I did not photograph the people, but preferred the plant, which represents life. This is the way I like to talk about life and its precariousness: a delicate, non-invasive way.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 3 Contrasts

This juxtaposition highlights contrasts, even though it tells about the same city, Rome. Both lives are on the pavement, but they are completely different lives: there are those who do not have the possibility of having a roof over their heads and those who have the chance of getting married, a life that collapses and one that begins. Personally, the issue of contrasts gives me the desire to tell through photography, there are many in life and we can choose to show the ones we want. The pavement is a place where all the things of a city meet, it is a part shared by all. It becomes a meeting point, where everything mixes, but it also says what represents who. In the second photo, when I met the bride with her husband and their photographers, a small detail caught my attention: they were obviously a beautiful and very elegant couple, but her dress was picking up a lot of leaves and other things from the pavement. It was like seeing the beautiful and the dirty mingling at the same time. The second shows the uncertainty of the future: some are able to walk on rays of light, while others are forced to move in darkness.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 4 Retrospectives

These photos set up a retro-perspective, in the sense that the point of view focuses on the back of a scene in both of them. The back of the scene is in the foreground, but there are other elements of the frame that make up the front: a gentleman sitting on a bench in the first photo, a naked child in the second. The first photo was taken in Rome in 2015: I was amazed to meet this lady walking with her cat. I was struck by the harmony between the lady and the animal, and also how the fur and hair bore some resemblance. The cat, with that sly air, seems to ask: 'What are you doing?'. I'm very interested in this side of street photography, I don't like to show things always in a tragic way, it's also nice to do it with a certain irony. The second photo was taken in Bamako in 2016: some friends were braiding each other's hair, that's why the girl is holding a mirror. However, she is not looking at her image in the mirror, she is looking aside. She is looking at the younger little girl she carries on her back, wrapped in a piece of cloth. This picture represents for me the transition from childhood to adulthood. The girl's reflected gaze, which turns backwards and is softened by a smile, is also a look back to the past, to the childhood that the girl is abandoning in order to grow up.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 5 Journeys

Both pictures concern tourists in the city of Rome. What you see in the background of the photos is not real, it is the advertising image of the city. Visually, it is important for me to play on different levels, to let the city speak through the different people who live it. Unlike the photos of the pavements in Rome (juxtaposition n. 3), the relationship here is with the image of the city, not with its lived life. At the same time, photographic elements such as the horse evoke presences that cannot be seen: for example, who brought the horse there? I am interested in linking presences to absences: I could have shown the whole horse and not just its back, but I prefer to show fragments of reality, I don't like to show it in its entirety. Moreover, the touristic images of the city's monuments refer to a journey throughout time, not only through space, and to our quest for knowledge and awareness through the journey itself.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 6 Dreams

This couple of photos represents the circulation of images and ideas through the movement of people. In this case, this movement simply concerns mobility in one's own city: in the first photo a young man with a Bob Marley T-shirt is riding a motorbike in Bamako, in the second picture a man wears a shirt with Ghaddafi's face printed on it, while he is cycling on a street of Thika in Kenya. It is curious that both the faces of these renowned people are on the back of the shirts, as if they were an alter ego of the people

who wear them. Although in different ways, both the figure of Bob Marley and that of Ghaddafi represent Africa: a social and political project that aspires to unity, justice and independence for African peoples. We know that this project has never been realised. I believe there are several elements that deserve to be observed in the everyday, because they tell us both about the past and the present, but also about our dreams and where we are going. The faces of Bob Marley and Ghaddafi printed on the T-shirts people wear, remind us of the dreams of the weakest, of those who do not have a voice. We know that image control is part of border control; however, I am convinced that these symbols cross borders invisibly, that they can circulate even without being noticed. People carry these symbols around because they still recognise themselves in the force of their words and ideas.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 7 Balance

Both photos were taken in Bamako and represent some kind of acrobatics, the ability to keep one's balance, the quest for height. The first is taken from the bottom upwards, pointing at the sky, highlighting the height of the man standing on the shoulders of others, and is intended to convey a mythical atmosphere. It is a photo taken on the outskirts of Bamako, in Kanadjiguila, during *ke-blenké* ritual. *Ke-blenké* means 'red men' in Mandinka and Bambara, this is a ritual that takes place in the Kaye area, Kolokani being the town where this group resides. The photo depicts a group of boys dressed in ritual costumes; the headdresses have red tufts that refer to the so-called 'red men'. The second photo shows an ordinary moment, a little girl is playing in the street with her friends. In this game, one punctures cans (in this case cans of tomato sauce) and puts a rope through the holes, which are then grabbed for walking. So, what is funny is feeling to be tall and also keeping your balance: this picture represents for me the desire to grow up. To represent this desire to grow up I did not want to make a portrait of the little girl, I was more interested in the tomato boxes, the ropes and her shadow. In fact, in this photo the lens points downwards. If you look closely, it is the shadow that reveals to us that this is not an adult, but a little girl. On her shoulders she carries a kind of backpack with a stick, like an arrow: they are other parts of the game, the materials to fix the ropes if they split.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 8 Traces

Both photos were taken in Rome and evoke traces of human presence in the environment. In these traces I see faces. The first is a drawing on a bench, created with a single unbroken line, a face looking towards the sky. The second is the shape created by water as it is absorbed by the earth. These traces we leave, sometimes without realising it, in photography are also reflections of reality. They express the relationship between the environment and the people who inhabit it. Sometimes we do not grasp it, but every step we take leaves some marks, some are obvious, others less so. I like to tell the story of people through the details, the unusual shapes, which are also what each of us composes in our own journey.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 9 Water

The juxtaposition of these photos is evidently linked to the element of water. However, the images express different dimensions of the relationship with water, including both abundance and measure. Both photos were taken in Rome. The first one shows a public fountain leaking water and flooding the surrounding space. The first thing I thought of when I took it was all those places where having water is a problem. In the picture there is a boy washing his hands at the fountain, but there is much more water than he needs. In the second picture, on the other hand, there is a dove resting on a fountain to drink. The water comes out so flush that we can isolate the drops in its fall. The idea of measure that

this image of water gives, is also reinforced by the dove balancing on the edge of the fountain. Fountains are designed primarily for people, but as we observe them we realise that there are many other life forms with whom we share them. I like to emphasise this inseparability of the human from the non-human. There is also a question of light: the abundance and prominence of the water in the first photo is emphasised by its ability to reflect light and illuminate the space and the image; in the second, on the contrary, the water is backlit, the effect of measure is also expressed in its remaining in the shadows.



Photographic juxtaposition n. 10 Ties

These images tell about the intimate relationship between human and non-human. The first picture was taken in Tambacounda, Senegal. I went to visit this guy who raises doves and I noticed that there was a great affection between him and his birds. I find it very interesting this ability of understanding each other without being able to speak to each other, it makes us realise that communication is not only made by voice and words. The second photo was taken in Kolokani, a village in Mali. It shows a maize field where a child is working with a bull. In both photos the animals are in the foreground and the faces of the people are hidden: I am not interested in revealing their identity but in telling them through the relationship they have with other living beings, through the interdependence that exists between them in the context in which they live.

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out of topic

photo-essays

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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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Cultural Fluidity in the Context of the Hakka Community in Southeast Asia

VOLUME 14 | No 1 | 2025
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-183

Abstract

The documentation of Hakka traditions, particularly the majority of Hopo Hakka, within the Chinese ethnic community in Miri, a city in Eastern Malaysia, reveals a delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to the rapid changes of the contemporary world. As these communities navigate modern advancements, their traditional practices and values risk being overshadowed and diminished by the undertow of cultural homogeneity. This visual ethnographic research examines how the Hopo Hakka community in Miri strives to maintain its unique cultural identity through the establishment of the Hakka Association in the area. By analyzing the role of the Miri Hakka Association and their community's initiatives, the research highlights the strategies and values that foster a sense of belonging and equality among the Miri Hakka, positioning them as integral members of society rather than marginalized outsiders.

Keywords

Hakka, Visual Ethnography, Photography, Southeast Asia, Migration

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Introduction

The Hakka people, known for their perseverance and strong sense of community, have a rich history marked by continuous migration (Cohen 1996). According to Xianglin (2018), a profound contributor to the Hakka research spectrum that described Hakka's history for over six great migrations, the Hakka people started moving towards the southward Yangtze River basin; followed by the second migration in the Tang Dynasty where the migration took place as a large number of northern Hans retreat into the Gan and Fujian area to escape the "Anshi Rebellion". The third migration took place in the Wei dynasties, with the Hans again avoiding the invasion of northern ethnic groups, and together settled in the rugged terrains of Guangdong and Fujian provinces where they formed a larger Hakka tribe (Xianglin 2018).

From these migration patterns, we can deduce the reoccurring traits that are seen in the contemporary Hakka community. The continuous need to move without settling permanently created a scattered topology of the Hakka ethnic group. The diversity present in historical Hakka clans is through the intermingling of local ethnic groups during their migrations. This experience of being outsiders, reflected in the term "Hakka" itself which translates to "guest people," fostered a unique cultural identity built on resilience, adaptability, and a tight-knit community spirit (Chin and Chang 2022). The history lineages, also sometimes called clans, are defined by genealogies sharing common ancestors and they play an important socio-cultural role in Chinese society (Svensson 2022)

Miri, one of the largest cities of Sarawak in Eastern Malaysia, became home to a significant Hakka population during the 19th century, specifically the Riam District (Chong 2009) (Figure 1). This coincided with the intensive wave of Chinese Migration to the Malay states due to poverty and losses from the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion (Chin and Chang 2022). As such, many Hakkas fled to Southeast Asia to escape persecution, poverty, and the ongoing hardship in China.



Figure 1. View of Lianlue, also known as Riam Road in the southern part of Miri city, where 80% of the local Hakka communities are from the Hopo region (Chong 2009). Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.

Traditionally the Hakka were drawn by opportunities in gold mining and agriculture in Malaysia (Leo 2015), however, other testimonies of migration and settlement of the Hakka Hopo community in Miri are through recruitment by leading engineering contractor Yang Shu Kou, who had secured multiple government and local oil field projects upon entering Sarawak (Chong 2009). Originally from Puning, Yang Kou recruited workers from nearby Hopo in Jieyang County (now Jiexi County) for his Miri Road and bridge projects. Despite both locations being in Chaozhou prefecture, many Hakka settlers in Riam have their origins in the Hopo province of China (Chong 2009).

Besides the evident presence in the aforementioned district, the Hakka and Chinese migration in East Malaysia, particularly in Miri, is noticed by the existence and the establishment of non-governmental associations commonly affiliated with different Chinese ethnic groups. Founded in 1955, the Miri Hakka Association is a key place of aggregation for the local Hakka community. Throughout the years their activities epitomize aspects of cultural fluidity, transculturality and intersectionality in the Association's effort to adapt Hakka's unique culture to the present-day context.

To sustain the Hakka identity in Miri, the association holds social activities aimed more towards socioeconomic sustainability rather than a cultural preservation perspective. Most events from 2017 to 2019 are general participation in blood donations, association gatherings, organized trips, and charity works. Some interesting social activities that happen annually are singing competitions organized by the Miri Hakka Association's own culture and recreation section with the theme around Hakka folk music. These singing competitions emphasising Hakka songs can be linked to spatial belonging. A sense of belonging is associated with the idea of home which refers to spaces of

familiarity, comfort, and emotional attachment, and feelings of security generate a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar or insecure environment (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). With the support of key governmental figures, the association could perpetuate their culture by creating an event for Miri Hakkas to share traditional folk songs and pop music amidst the collectivist society of Chinese Malaysians.

Aspects of intersectionality can be seen in the hosting of gatherings and international cultural exchanges with Taiwan and China. Lim and Wang (2008) stated that the Hakka have a custom of gathering with friends and family in autumn. In Singapore and Malaysia, they reflect on the struggles, industry, and thrift of the early Hakka settlers and remind the younger generation to always remember the Hakka spirit. Newspaper clippings from local news such as Li's written article (2019) on the Hakka conference and See Hua Daily News's reporting (2019) highlight the Hakka Miri Association's continuous outreach to the cultural discipline, planning visits and exchanges with Hakka from Taiwan and China to not only boost social outreach but to continue this drive of intersectionality between the Hakka consciousness and the local Malaysian Chinese solidarity.

Consequently, the study has focused on how the Hakka community, historically marked by permanent migration and entailed by the sense of 'guest people', reorganizes to express the Hakka identity in East Malaysia. By probing the aspects of cultural fluidity within the Hakka community, and particularly through the observation of the Miri Hakka Association as a case study, it evinces that belonging is never a coherent or autonomous experience, but a complex, multiple, and partial, fragmented, or segmented relationship (Fridlund 2014). As well as that cultural interactionism rejects the idea that social structure is stable, asserting instead that identities are fluid, with individuals constructing their identities differently in various contexts (Zhang 2017).

Methodology

Focusing on the complexities of Hakka migration and its cultural milieu in Miri, the researchers planned to visit the Miri Hakka Association currently located on the 1st and 2nd floors of a building in Miri's downtown area (Figure 2) attempting to identify aspects of cultural fluidity, hybridity, transculturality, and intersectionality within the Miri Hakka community.



Figure 2. View of the Miri Hakka Association located on the first and second floor of the downtown area of Miri, East Malaysia. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.

An initial contact with the association's office was established via email allowing the researchers to set an appointment to meet the actual association's chairman Kelvin Kong and other relevant members. During the first visit the researchers were introduced to the Association's consultant, Mr Lee, whose regales tales of the six migrations that brought forth the surge of Hakka in Guandong and Fujian alongside the establishment of Miri Hakka's Association in 1955.

The qualitative methodology was chosen because it best fits the objective of this research in order to describe cultural contexts as they manifest in people's lives (Busetto et al. 2020). During this fieldwork study, the researchers conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a set of questions previously partaken with the association members. Due to the cultural complexities of the studied context, the in-depth interview modality as a popular method for collecting qualitative research data (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Eppich et al. 2019), was found to be the appropriate approach.

Mandarin and English were the predominant languages used during the interviews and verbal exchanges between researchers and members of the association and respective stakeholders. The interview data recorded in Mandarin was later translated to English for common understanding and analyses.

The Miri Hakka Association self-published book titled, **美里客家公会成立50周年纪念特刊** [50 Years Establishment of Miri Hakka Association: Special Edition] (Chong 2009) is used as part of the vital literature for the study. The book highlights relevant elements of Hakka culture. This includes the history of migration into the region, the Miri Hakka Association's background and list of members and Sarawak Hakka's economical livelihood which are crucial details to the historical documentation of the association's presence in the local community.

Considering the use of photographic documentation as a tool of visual ethnography the researchers have documented several locations including the city districts resided by the Hakka community, the precinct of the Miri Hakka Association and social events and community's initiatives organized by the same. The idea of using photographic documentation and audio recordings aligns with the precepts of focused ethnography which attempts to offset the short-term field visits by an intensive use of audio-visual technologies for data collection and analyses (BenGhida and Schellini 2024; Rafee et al. 2016; Knoblauch 2005).

Finally, to contextualize the photographs taken during the documentation process, a participant validation interview (Lindheim 2022; Birt et al. 2016) was conducted, in which association members validated their relevance and commented on their content. This process has utterly assisted the researchers in visualizing aspects of cultural fluidity and better contextualizing the images' captions.

Photos



Figure 3. View of the Miri Hakka Association's meeting room. The total area of the association is 150 m², which comprises the areas consisting of the 1st-floor auditorium room of 10x15 m² and the 2nd-floor meeting room of 10x18 m². Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 4. Inside the Miri Hakka Association, many of its walls are used as a display of the memory of its previous members. Besides the main entrance door, a wall exhibits a double sequence of twenty framed portraits covering decades of the association's existence and history. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 5. Portrait of the current Miri Hakka Association's chairman Kelvin Kong whose tenure started in 2021. This photo was taken during the anniversary event organized by the Miri Hakka Association on the 30th of June 2024 at Thai Poo Kindergarten. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 6. The Miri Hakka Association stores several objects that entail a dedicated space of memorabilia. As informed, the furniture clock was donated by the Brunei Hakka Association which demonstrates the Hakka associations are interconnected to a broad network that surpasses the Malaysia state limits towards neighbor countries of Southeast Asia. A reproduction of a hand-colored photographic portrait of Chong Goek Moi, the donor of the clock, is framed in the Miri Hakka Association meeting room. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 7. The displayed portraits of member-donors-that contributed to the construction of Miri Hakka Association's first building. One of the portraits Chao Gao Chuan (left) is in a place of honor among trophies and mementos. Chao's portrait bears the medal of Ahli Bintang Sarawak (A.B.S) in his right pocket. The medal is awarded to leaders or Sarawakians for their committed service to the country, A.B.S medals fall under the Management and Professional Groups, including Assistant Superintendent of Police, Major (Army), Squadron Leader (Air Force), and Lieutenant Commander (Navy). Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 8. Portrait of Chao Gao Chuan, a prominent community member had his tenure as Miri Hakka Association's chairman from 1996 to 1999. Chao is a senior Miri Hakka association member and was the *kapitan* and head of village to Riam Road. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 9. The Miri Hakka Association was founded in 1955. The association hosts a few anniversary events every year to celebrate its establishment by inviting the Hakka Association from other branches to the celebratory event. The figure above marks the association's 324th event organized by the Miri Hakka Association on the 30th of June 2024 at Thai Poo Kindergarten. The official chairmen from the seven

designated Hakka association branches (Brunei, Tai Poo, Guanying, Huining, Lonzhuang, Hopo, Miri and Jiayin), Chao Gao Chuan and the Sarawak's Transport Minister Dato Sri Lee Kin Shi are present in the photo. Each member holds a fried glutinous sesame ball, a traditional Hakka dessert. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 10. The image shows how different Hakka associations are distinguished by wearing colorful team polo shirts with their respective logos and names. The Miri Hakka Association members wear red polo shirts with white collars and golden Chinese Mandarin inscriptions, 'Miri Hakka Association'. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 11. The calligraphic work written in Mandarin meaning "Hakka as one family" expresses the collectivist ideal of Hakka kinship. Despite the Hakka dialect and its linguistic aspects being an integral element that defines the Hakka community, this calligraphic work and other oral and written communicational contexts observed during this field research evinced the predominant use of the Mandarin language. One of the reasons for the assimilation of the Mandarin language has been the Chinese

inter-ethnic relationships and collectivism. As noted by Chin and Chang (2022), Chinese Malaysian communities aimed to enhance their solidarity against the Malay-centric policies by reducing the role of dialect-based identity. Their solidarity gives rise to the linguistic emphasis on Mandarin as a common tongue among Chinese Malaysians. The Mandarin language emerges as a unifying language, contributing to this linguistic shift. Yong and Kong (2022) highlight the Hakka people's ability to adapt to new environments while preserving their cultural values. The Hakka dialect served as a distinguishing marker, but over time, its significance waned, however, the core ideal of their own identity "family". Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.



Figure 12. During the visit to the Miri Hakka Association, Benson—the leader of the Youth Hakka Association section—demonstrated the recently purchased “Green Lion King” head for the Hakka Lion’s dance. A Chinese tradition that has developed its own variance and characteristics in Malaysia. Contrary to the more common lion heads in modern dances, the structure that defines the Hakka lion remains as a square—symbolizing “the Hakka lion eats in all directions” (TVS Entertainment 2023). Benson mentioned the importance of preserving this tradition while the Miri Hakka Association is looking for a lion dance instructor to train its young generation. Photo by Marcelo Schellini, 2024.

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The guardian of forest and forest-dwelling communities in Sundarban: An ethno-photographic account of the Bon Bibi worship and livelihood struggle

Abstract

Sundarban is the largest continuous mangrove forest and one of the richest biodiverse regions, which provides many critical ecosystem services from local to global level. Throughout human and non-human interaction in the region, a unique syncretic eco-centric culture has evolved centred around the local forest goddess, the Bon Bibi. This ethnographic article elucidates the emergence of Bon Bibi as the guardian of forests and forest-dwelling communities. Through a series of photographs, the article portrays different traditional livelihood practices, struggles of local forest/river-dwelling communities, belief systems, and rituals that played pivotal roles in adaptive strategies to avoid human-tiger conflict and foster community-based forest conservation in uncertain times of changing climate. The legends of Bon Bibi further teach several ecological virtues, from coexistence between humans and non-humans to avoiding conspicuous natural resource consumption. The Pantheon belief system played a prominent role in unifying diverse communities to foster resilience and provide moral strength while venturing into challenging mangrove landscapes.

Keywords

Bon Bibi; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Livelihood Struggle; Human-Tiger Conflict; Climate Change; Sundarban

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Introduction

Sundarbans is the largest continuous mangrove forest extending over the coastal regions of India (4,200 sq. km.) and Bangladesh (6,000 sq. km.). Due to its immense ecological importance and rich biological diversity, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed it as a world heritage site in 1987. It is home to millions of climatic vulnerable populations and several endangered and threatened species, such as estuarine crocodiles and the man-eating Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) (Ghosh et al. 2015).

Sundarban has witnessed a distinctive settlement history from ancient to contemporary periods. During the early thirteenth century, an unknown holy Muslim saint introduced rice cultivation in the fertile soil of the delta region, and the initial settlements started on different islands. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence indicates that some indigenous populations lived on different islands. Due to abrupt climatic change or invasion by the Portuguese and the Magh pirates, the entire region was depopulated. The Mughal Empires considered Sundarbans a rice frontier region, but there is inadequate historical evidence of flourishing large-scale human settlement in that period. Later, the British colonial government began formal land reclamation by bringing tribal people (Santhal, Munda, and Orang) from central India to clear the forest to expand agricultural activities and supply timber to meet the thrust of the Industrial Revolution. In the meantime, various Christian missionary and philanthropic activities have begun in different parts of the Sundarban. As a result, it has led to a diverse ethnic composition comprising Hinduism, Islamism, Christianity, Buddhism, and tribal populations (Eaton 1990; Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010).

From the early civilisation to sustain in hostile terrain, human and non-human interaction has developed a unique syncretic eco-centric folk religion centred on the forest goddess Bon Bibi. Etymologically, the name Bon Bibi has been derived from the two Bengali words '*bon and bibi*,' which can be translated to '*lady of the forest*' or '*forest maiden*.' The earlier account of Bon Bibi can be traced to the many regional literary works and folklore; most notable among them are the late nineteenth-century literary works of Abdur Rahim's and Muhammad Khater's Bon Bibi's Juharanama (glory of Bon Bibi) (Sen & Mukherjee 2020). Both of the Juharanama are epic Bengali poems that narrate Bon Bibi's tale in two verses, which coincide with local folk tales: the first part depicts the background and emergence of Bon Bibi, while the second part tells the story of Dhuke—a poor child compelled to go in the forest—and how Bon Bibi protected him from the danger of man-eating tiger demon.

Part I: Emergence of Bon Bibi

According to mythology, Bon Bobi is the daughter of a Muslim saint, Ibrahim, who lived in Mecca. Ibrahim's first wife, Phul Bibi, was unable to conceive, and she insisted her husband pray at the Prophet Muhammad's grave, which he did. The Prophet advised him to marry for the second time and have two children. Upon receiving prophetic advice, Ibrahim married his second wife, Gulal Bibi, who subsequently became pregnant.

Hearing the news, Phul Bibi became jealous and requested Ibrahim to abandon her. Phul Bibi's wish led to the deportation of Gulal Bibi to the land of eighteen tides (Sundarbans), where she gave birth to twin children, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. Gulal Bibi was frightened about her ability to raise both of them and decided to raise Shah Jongoli. She abandoned Bon Bibi in the forest, where she was taken care by Bhangar Shah (a saint who lived in the forest), deer, and other animals. Later, Bon Bibi reunited with her parents and brother, learning about the divine order with the accompanies of her brother Shah Jongoli to protect the forest and its residents from Dakshin Rai, a legendary man-eating tiger demon. It is believed that Dakshin Rai was a Brahmin sage from lower Bengal who was once a tiger. Through his ascetic powers, he refused to share forest resources with humans and legitimised their killing by calling it tax. His arrogance and greed led him to claim the entire forest, which led to a broken trust between humans and non-humans. After a series of epic battles between Bon Bibi and Dakshin Rai's mother, Narayani, Bon Bibi conquered and established her reign, which brought her the title of guardian of forests. To establish peace in the Sundarbans, Bon Bibi and Narayani have become friends. However, the tranquillity did not last long, leading to the second part of the story (Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010; Uddin 2019).

Part-II: Tale of Dukhe

Bon Bibi's legends always precede the tale of Dukhe and Dhona. According to folklore, Dukhe was a young boy living with his widowed mother in impoverished poverty. Dhona was Dhuke's uncle and a wealthy businessman who insisted Dhuke join his honey collection team. Despite his mother's disapproval, Dukhe left with his uncle to collect honey to sustain the family's basic needs. Dukhe's mother reminded him:

*"...you're going to the tideland where dangers are legion...
In the land of Dokkhin Rai [Dakshin Rai]...; he hunts humans...
...the lady of Jungle [forest], Ma [mother] Bon Bibi...
She'll protect you with her brother, Shah Jongoli."* (Ghosh 2021: 22)

After reaching the deep forest, the team was unable to find any beehives for honey and wax. Dakshin Rai appeared before the team and pledged an abundance of honey in exchange for the sacrifice of Dhuke. Dhona acquiesced to the proposal. The intention was unveiled to Dukhe when all the team members left him alone. He immediately remembered his mother's last message. He called out to Bon Bibi, who rescued him from the life-threatening danger of the tiger demon and returned to his mother with abundant resources. Dakshin Rai's arrogance was destroyed by losing the battle to Bon Bibi. Fearing for his life, Dakshin Rai sought forgiveness and took refuge to Gazi Pir, a Muslim saint who lived in Sundarban. Bon Bibi graciously accepted Dakshin Rai's plea and regarded him as a son at the request of Gazi Pir. Then, she demarcated the forest into two regions: half of the land for wilderness, where all animals could live without human intervention, and another half for human settlement and open resource extraction.

Dakshin Rai promised Bon Bibi that he would be her servant forever, never harm anyone, and coexist without harming humans. Dukhe pledges that whenever villagers enter the forest, only with a 'pure heart' and 'empty hand' (Jalais 2008).



Photo 1: The Bon Bibi at Bonnie Camp, Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The above photograph depicts the clay idol of Bon Bibi seated on a tiger. Shah Jongoli stands on her left-hand side, and Dukhe is cradled in her lap. Traditionally, Bon Bibi is dressed in vibrant sarees with yellow, red, and green hues, adorned with detailed embroidery representing prosperity and love. Her head is crowned, and her neck is embellished with layers of necklaces made of gold or golden colour, as well as multiple layers of garlands made of hibiscus and marigold flowers. Her nose and ears are enlivened with rings, and her wrists are encircled with Shakha Pola—white and red bangles made of conch shell and red coral—in traditional mudras to symbolise blessings. Shah Jongoli is depicted as a brave warrior, adorned with garlands, holding a symbolic weapon, and wearing traditional headgear to showcase his bravery. Although the

appearance of Bon Bibi idols varies according to the creativity of the idol makers, religious differences, location, and availability of resources, the central theme remains consistent.

Present Day Practice

“In the forest, Ma Bon Bibi is our only hope who will protect us from any danger, including the attack of tigers, while venturing to collect honey, crabs, and fish”.

Tapas Haldar, a honey collector, Sundarbans (Interview, 2023).

Unlike Tapas, every forest fringe villager of Sundarbans, especially the forest-workers¹, worships Bon Bibi, regardless of religion, caste, and creed. The local communities identify themselves as Dhuke and believe Bon Bibi will protect them from any threat while venturing into the inhospitable mangrove forest, where man-eating tigers, crocodiles, and venomous snakes are persistent.

Before going to the forest, every forest-workers performs puja in the Bon Bibi's *thaan* (shrine) or puts a new saree and garland on the mangrove tree. The *thaan* is usually located at the edge of the forest or forest-fringe villages in a small hut with clay idols of Bon Bibi. Occasionally, fresh tiger pug-mark can be seen near *thaan*. Different types of rites are observed among religious groups; the followers of Hinduism perform puja, whereas the Muslims recite dua (invocation) from the Quran. After that, the devotees served wildflowers and sweets. Anup Mondal, a resident of Sundarbans, stated:

In Bon Bibi puja, there is no need of any Brahman (priest) or specific mantras; it can be performed by any folk, irrespective of social position or religious group. Ma (mother) Bon Bibi protects everyone who calls upon her (Interview, 2023).

The pantheon and heterodox worldview of Bon Bibi's belief system bridge the communal faultline and challenge the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Its inclusive nature and homogeneous social order have become popular among the lower caste, tribal, and marginal communities (Bhattacharyya 2017). They especially follow the norms derived from Bon Bibi's legend, such as entering the forest with “pure heart and an empty hand”. Here, the pure heart epitomises the avoidance of any conscious intention of surplus consumption or excessive collection of forest resources, and the empty hand exemplifies the non-violence attitude and co-existence with forests and wild animals. After entering the forest, the forest-workers adhere to some traditional norms, such as avoiding cutting trees, not intentionally disturbing the wilderness, and abstaining from defecating in the forest to maintain the cleanliness and hygiene of the forest ecosystem.

In many forest fringe villages, an annual Bon Bibi *mela* (fair) is held on the last Tuesday of *Baisakh* and the first of *Magh* in the Bengali calendar. This yearly gathering reaffirms the connection with Bon Bibi and transcends the traditional belief to future

¹ Forest workers are a common identity given by the residents of Sundarban, whose livelihood directly depends on the forest and river, including honey collectors, crab catchers, and fishing communities.

generations. Sometimes, the local artist performs Bon Bibi's legendary narrative in the form of a play—mostly the tale of Dukhe.





Photos 2 & 3: Bon Bibi's Thaan, Maipith & Mangrove Worship. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023, 2024.

A fisherman stands before Bon Bibi's thaán to perform rituals before commencing the fishing journey (photo 2). This thaán is located on the edge of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) area, where tigers or pug marks are occasionally sighted. The forest-workers revere mangroves as a form of veneration for Bon Bibi. In the absence of a Bon Bibi's thaán, they worship mangroves and adore new sarees and garlands on them. Worshipping mangroves signifies the close relationship between local communities and mangroves.



Photo 4: Invoking Blessing of Bon Bibi. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The local community considered wooden boats as the living entities and the primary means of their livelihood, thus treating them with great dignity. Both ends of the boats were painted red colour and decorated with garlands. Standing on or touching these ends with one's feet was strictly forbidden, which would indicate disrespect. After offering puja at Bon Bibi's than or draping saree in the mangrove, they returned to their boats and performed additional rituals such as cleaning the boat, conducting puja, and distributing sweets to local areas.

Guardian of Forest and Forest-Dwelling Communities in Sundarbans: An Ethno-Photographic Account of the Bon Bibi Worship and Livelihood Struggle





Photo 5 & 6: Final Preparation & Waiting for Tide. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

After performing rituals, the forest-workers await the high tides to begin their journey. Typically, they venture into the liminal landscape of mangroves and rivers for two to three days for fishing and crab catching and two weeks for honey collection.



Photo 7: In Searching for Livelihood. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The forest-workers began a challenging journey through narrow creeks and tidal rivers with only one hope to catch an abundance of fish, crabs, and honey without encountering any tiger attacks. They typically adhered to the local calendar to determine the most auspicious dates and times, which guided them to understand the moon's phase and intensity of tides during the journey. Despite several struggles and uncertainties in the traditional occupation, they believe a successful fish, crab catch, or honey collection depends on Bon Bibi's blessings.

Livelihood Struggle of Forest-Workers

The Sundarbans have witnessed severe consequences of climate change, ranging from hydro-geophysical disruption to dismantling the socio-ecological balance in recent decades. From 1980 to 2007, the sea surface temperature increased at an accelerated rate of 0.5° C per decade, with an annual sea level rise ranging from 3.14 to 4.0 mm. The frequent occurrence of natural disasters, particularly super-cyclonic storms and floods, has increased alarmingly. The recurrent super-cyclones have led to multifaceted impacts: widespread deforestation, loss of human and wildlife, saline water intrusion into agricultural lands, extensive damage to housing infrastructure, and a surge in various waterborne diseases (Cited in Ghimire & Vikas 2012). Consequently, the local communities are entrapped in the impoverished poverty cycle. Many households continue to grapple with the aftermath of Cyclone Aila's devastation in 2009. Even though the subsequent cyclones—Phailin in 2013, Hudhud in 2014, Bulbul in 2019, Amphan in 2020, and Remal in 2024—along with the COVID-19 pandemic have broken the economic

foundations of coastal communities. Traditional forest-workers are confronting the impacts of climate change on the one hand and the imposition of restrictions on natural resources and wildlife conflicts on the other.



Photo 8: Sinking Land & Reclaimed by Nature. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The Sundarban is a dynamic deltaic system characterised by ongoing delta formation. Due to the abrupt rise in sea level, the annual net landmass loss has increased significantly—Lohachara, Suparibhanga, and Bedford islands have already submerged—while others are experiencing progressive submergence. Consequently, the local communities are losing their homes and agricultural land, and many are becoming internally displaced (climate refugees).



Photo 9: Mangrove Landscape. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The mangrove landscape of the Sundarbans is characterised by its complex network of mudflats, narrow and shallow creeks, and the upward growth of mangrove *pneumatophores* (breathing roots). The breathing roots, muddy terrain, and dense forest serve as natural barriers to movement. The traditional forest-workers face these natural obstacles, along with the threat of tiger attacks on land and crocodile attacks in the water. They believe that Bon Bibi will protect them from this formidable threat.



Photo 10: Fishing Community. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

Traditionally, fishing communities use various sizes and types of boats based on their economic capital. Those who undertake extended fishing expeditions typically use larger motorised boats, accommodating teams of five to seven people. The larger boat may either be self-owned or rented. Upon their return, the profits are equitably distributed among the team members, including a share allocated to the boat owners. Those who engage in shorter fishing trips, lasting one to two days, often use their manually operated boats.





Photo 11 & 12: Perilous Occupations – Honey Collection & Crab Catching. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2024, 2023.

Honey collection and crab-catching are the most perilous occupations in the Sundarbans. While fishing can be conducted from boats, honey collection and crab-catching require venturing onto land. Often, individuals penetrate deep into the forest and excavate crab burrows to capture them, and honey collectors venture into the deep forest to search for beehives. This activity exposes them to the territories of tigers, leading to an increasing risk of human-tiger encounters. It is frequently reported that most tiger attacks occur during the crab-catching time.



Photo 13: Hental - the Natural Camouflage for Tiger. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The Hental (*Phoenix paludosa*) acts as a natural camouflage for tigers because the stripes on the tiger's body and the dense Hental forest match each other. Tigers adeptly use the cover, silently observing human activities before launching sudden attacks from behind. Many tiger attack incidents were reported in this area, and forest workers try to avoid these regions.



Photo 14: Net Fencing to Reduce Human-Tiger Conflicts. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The forest department has implemented several measures to address the issue of human-tiger conflicts; the installation of net fencing is the most recent intervention. The forest department has strategically covered net fencing at various entry points, estuarine mouths, and around the village area. According to the forest department, this strategy has effectively reduced conflicts. Local forest-dwelling communities claimed that the net fencing initially reduced the attack. Now, the tigers have learned to navigate around and across it, and many incidents of tiger straying and tiger attacks are occurring.



Photo 15: Bawali – The Tiger Charmer. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

Tiger charmers, locally known as Bawali, Gunin, and Pir, are reputed for their unique abilities to guide forest-dwelling communities, particularly honey collectors, and avoid human-tiger conflict. The local communities believe that the tiger charmer possesses special powers and Bon Bibi's blessings, allowing them to safely venture into the forests and prevent illnesses through traditional plant-based medicinal practices. The Photo portrays a Gunin demonstrating the size of a tiger's paw. He has been venturing the forest for the last 40 years and has had numerous encounters with tigers. He claims he has successfully averted tiger attacks and rescued many co-workers by reciting *specific mantras*. On the contrary, he also asserts that the mantras do not possess inherent power but provide courage to confront a tiger. If someone courageously stands in front of a tiger, the tiger will retreat attack. Through extensive experience, the tiger charmers have learned the tiger's behaviour and attack patterns, which enable them to avoid dangerous situations. Hence, local communities prefer to rely on the wisdom of tiger charmer.





Photo 16 & 17: Victim of Tiger Attack. Photo by Amir Soheli, 2023.

Traditional forest workers frequently fall prey to tiger attacks. The lack of medical facilities, inadequate compensation, and government failures exacerbate the traumatic conditions for victims and their families. In Photo 19, a survivor of a tiger attack displays his wound, which has left him physically disabled to resume his previous occupation. According to him, “with the blessings of Bon Bibi, my wife rescued me from the tiger’s jaws”. On the contrary, Photo 20 depicts the family of another victim who lost her husband to a tiger attack. His body was never recovered from the forest. She expresses her distress and scepticism about Bon Bibi’s protective power and status, questioning, “If Bon Bibi is our protector, why did my spouse get killed in a tiger attack? And why do tigers kill many poor people every year in the Sundarbans?”.



Photo 18: Returning Home. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

If the fishing and crab-catching community faces no danger, they return with their caught fish and crabs. Usually, female family members await the arrival to assist them in categorising the fish based on type and size for sale.



Photo 19: Preparation Begins for the Next Trip. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

After a few days of rest, the forest-workers prepare for their next trip with hope and uncertainty by repairing or making fishing nets for the next trip.



Photo 20: Restoring Mangrove, Chargheri, Sundarban Biosphere Reserve. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

With the help of a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the local communities are planting mangroves to restore degraded forests. For them, the forest is not only the source of different tangible ecosystem services but also a bridging connection with their forest goddess. Umashankar Mandal, an environmental activist, stated, "Here people are facing the wrath of climate change every day, and some community-based initiatives are restoring mangrove ecosystem in different islands of Sundarban to sustain in these sinking islands. The belief of Bon Bibi becomes a mediator to connect with mangroves, tigers, and the community... and communities get a reason to connect with divinity while protecting mangroves".

Conclusion

The legend of Bon Bibi has recently gained scholarly attention for its ecological wisdom and sustainable natural resource management principles. Although the worshipping of Bon Bibi is primarily prevalent among marginalised forest-workers in the Sundarbans region of India and Bangladesh, the anecdote teaches several ecological virtues from harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans to avoiding conspicuous

natural resource consumption to protecting mangroves. The pantheon belief system of Bon Bibi played a prominent role in unifying diverse communities to foster resilience and reduce risk in the period of disaster. The cultural significance of mangroves in Bon Bibi's tale plays a crucial role in encouraging the local community to engage in community-based mangrove restoration and protection efforts. While the Western hegemonic international neoliberal policies and state-led centralised policies are ineffective in restoring forests, incorporating traditional value-based community-led forest restoration and reduction of deforestation could be a sustainable alternative. Considering the trends in human-tiger conflicts and cases of tiger straying incidents, there is no correlation between the belief in Bon Bibi and tiger attacks. However, it empowers local marginalised communities by providing moral strength while venturing into precarious mangrove landscapes, giving their lives purpose and meaning.

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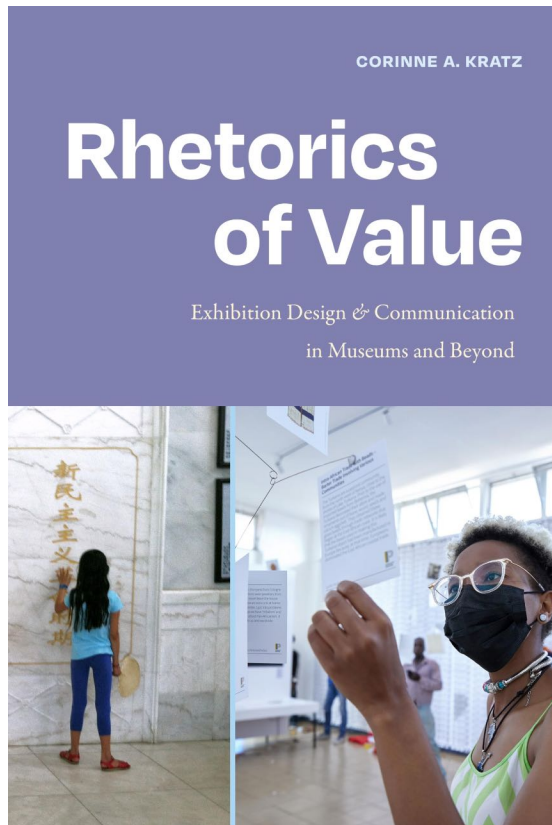
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In *Rhetorics of Value*, Corinne A. Kratz explores how exhibition design creates and conveys values that have the potential to touch, educate, and engage visitors. Drawing on case studies from the Victoria and Albert Museum, museums in South Africa and Kenya, a Hawaiian resort hotel, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, among others, Kratz shows how exhibits help shape and narrate cultural categories, values, and histories while provoking questions and evoking memories and experiences. She crosses contexts to consider ethnographic, history, and art exhibits in national and community museums and other display settings. Through these examples, Kratz traces how exhibition designers combine objects, texts, images, lighting, audio, space, and narratives to craft a complex, multilayered communicative form that visitors experience as they move through museums. By investigating the relationship between audience reception and exhibition design strategies, Kratz contends that through design, exhibits can shape the ways we know, the stories we tell, and our contours of meaning and engagement.

Corinne, A. Kratz, *Rhetorics of Value. Exhibition Design and Communication in Museums and Beyond*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2025

<https://www.dukeupress.edu/rhetorics-of-value>

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