

Journeys

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Five years ago, following the drowning deaths of over 300 asylum-seeking women, men and children off the coast of Lampedusa, an Italian diver, Renato Sollustri, recounted retrieving the bodies of those who had been trapped in the hold of the ship as it sank. He described swimming into the hold of the submerged boat and seeing the body of a young woman who seemed as if she was pregnant. He narrated taking her body out of the boat: “We laid her on the sea bed. We tied her with a rope to the other bodies and then...we rose with them from the depths of the sea”.¹ When they surfaced and lifted the young woman onto a waiting boat they found that she had given birth while the boat sank, the body of her small son, attached by his umbilical cord, still underneath her clothes.

In the aftermath of the sinking and in the subsequent weeks and months, the young woman remained unnamed in media coverage, as did many of the other dead, except those referred to directly in the accounts of survivors- many of whom ended up living precariously on the streets of Italian cities, despite initial platitudes and promises of citizenship.² In response to the public absence of those names, and the unnamed names and narratives of the hundreds, and then thousands, more women, men and children who died making the perilous crossing from Libya in the months and years following, an Italian solidarity collective produced a video naming the dead.

Filmed under-water, the expansive blue and sea soundscape of the short video are calming and almost meditative to begin with. Then the names of those who drowned, almost all from Eritrea and Ethiopia, are pronounced one by one. The enormity of the loss, and the (evoked and imagined) overwhelming fear of those on board the sinking ship, impact deeply as the video plays out, name by name, life by life. It is in the absence that the grief of witness, of imagining each individual struggle to breathe, and live, has a visceral impact.

In the years since first watching the video, I have thought a lot about how the journeys of those seeking asylum, and those on the move across borders, are represented, and what that representation can perpetuate and make chroniclers complicit in. Working with refugee, migrant and undocumented communities in various contexts of limbo has allowed me to witness the systemic violence of borders and those tasked with maintaining them. Violence that

¹ Guardian, 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/10/lampedusa-victims-mother-baby-umbilical-cord>

² *Der Spiegel*, 2014

is both overt and subtler, that of the devastating processes of profound demoralisation so often experienced by those navigating asylum systems.

It is a witness, of violence and community-based creative dissent to that violence, that has provided a framework for concurrent understandings of borders, as “tension and conflict, partition and connection, transversing and barricading, life and death” and one that has facilitated deeper personal understanding of their spatial and relational, racialised and gendered realities.³ With the bordered, militarised realities of EU policies as ineluctable scaffold of this framework, the direct causal effects of those borders, the “unbearable necro-political” are seen in the ever-mounting toll of preventable deaths.⁴ Witnessed, too, has been how documentary mediums have represented those whose journeys are defined by borders, and the wide, often un-interrogated spectrum of accountability that informs that representation.

In contexts in which refuge-seeking journeys have been so extensively documented- on the shores of Greek islands, in the desperation of those afloat in the Mediterranean, at militarised border crossings in the Balkans and in the fragile hopes of those in the bleakness and beauty of Calais- there is often the heavily mediated presence of the bodies of those who have survived, now alive in situations of stark precarity. Photos and videos, articles and soundscapes spotlight the vulnerability of that limbo, writing it large, focusing and defining. Subjects are given screen time but often exploration of or glimpses into the multiple subjectivities and experiences they navigate- of vulnerability and resilience, rupture and repair, crisis and survival- are noticeable in their absence.

Nuanced exceptions to documentation that isolates, and often over-exposes, vulnerability have also been present over the past years- work that is complex, empathetic, and that often provides platforms for advocacy and action. However, there is work, even when motivated by deep solidarity, that can still lack deeper insight into the struggle of those seeking refuge to make meaning of their experiences, experiences which can be overwhelming by their sheer injustice and lived humiliations. It is this existential process, of meaning-making, of the ‘speculative space’ of identity within borderlands, of ‘belonging, (self) representation and (dis) identification’ which can perhaps only truly be accountably represented by those who have lived to self-narrate the journey and whose self-authorship, and by extension self-agency, are so very powerful.⁵

Examples of the gravitas of self-authored work abound- Nandi Jola’s ‘Ink’, Vukasin Nedeljkovic’s Asylum Archive⁶, the Syrian Hakaya project’s story-harvesting and story-telling,⁷ The Migrant Manifesto’s⁸ call to action, the Arab Resource Collective for Popular Arts- Al-Jana’s⁹ oral histories of elder Palestinian refugees documented by younger archivists, in the writings and poems, songs and rap, photos and art of those navigating defunct asylum systems or those waiting, enduring and creating, in camps from Dadab to Zaatari to Yida to Moria. In each, absence and presence, subjects, subjectivities, and identity are explored in a multiplicity of ways, but there is constancy of accountability- and a process of consent of representation of protagonists that is active and participatory. It is an ethic- of total, immutable accountability to those whose stories are being entrusted and documented- which is ultimately predicated on an understanding of mutual, horizontal care, and of reciprocity.

³ Mezzadra & Nielson in Ziadeh, 2016

⁴ Bojadzijeve and Mezzadra, 2015, p.3, available at <https://www.focaalblog.com/2015/11/12/manuela-bojadzijeve-and-sandro-mezzadra-refugee-crisis-or-crisis-of-european-migration-policies/>

⁵ Barbera, 2015

⁶ <http://www.asylumarchive.com/>

⁷ <http://hakaya.org/en/timeless-tales-folktales-told-by-syrian-refugees/>

⁸ <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/migrant-manifesto/>

⁹ <http://al-jana.org/>

Documentary film and video vignettes are a medium I began to explore recently, after years of work in social justice and human rights contexts. Bringing a camera into the almost sacred spaces of collective grief and loss that so many of those communities were forced to endure would have felt deeply invasive. Over the past few years of working with support and solidarity projects at borders and in camps within Europe, however, the stories and narratives heard and witnessed- of fragile hopes and humiliations, dignity and endurance- were ones that made possible the re-framing, in my own mind, of the lens as something that could be solidarity-infused, self-reflexive and accountable.

The video vignettes that we went on to film, *The Border*,¹⁰ *Freedom*,¹¹ *Refuge*¹² and others, are limited glimpses, faltering and inadequate at times and- like much documentation done by those not indigenous to the context archived- inevitably extractive. However, they are carried by the eloquence and power of those we interviewed- the women and men and children to whom, in the filming, editing and aftermath, all of us in the small team who produced them, remained and remain ultimately accountable to.

That accountability meant that participants, whenever possible, viewed the editorial cuts of the interviews as we worked on them and had input into what was included and what wasn't, what was absent and what was present. It meant attempts at processes to dilute the unaccountable, subtle power too often implicit in editorial processes, which geographical borders prevented from being fully collaborative. It meant that Rana, Samar, Shayer, Mohammed and Rania set the boundaries and determined the relational borders of self-exposure crossed in terms of glimpses of anguish and vulnerability included in the edited vignettes from Idomeni. It meant that Mo Ismail decided whether or not he was comfortable with exposing the depth of his survivor's guilt, the dreams that haunt him, as he recounted the drowning death of his best friend during their journey from Libya across the Mediterranean Sea. It meant that strength and immense courage were platformed, but the burden of resilience not over-emphasised as a means of detracting from the need for structural justice.

It meant that pauses were held, tremors of shaky breath exhaled included in the edit and pain represented, carefully. It meant that sound-scapes were preserved in the edit, wind-drowned and rough, and music used only when it was produced by those who had lived the journey and when it served, as in the case of the Calais vignettes, to speak to the beauty of sisterhood, community and defiant struggle present in the camp and absent in our rushed, more desolate footage filmed on the eve of its demolition by the French authorities.

It meant awareness of and mindfulness of the inter-subjective space opened up during interviews, and an honoring of that tentative trust. It meant conscious awareness of the subtleties in which power and privilege are re-enacted and exploration of processes of decolonizing documentary, and decolonizing solidarity. It meant a feminist ethic of horizontal, ongoing care- of accompaniment and long-term support of those struggling for the freedom to move, to transverse the borders that separated them from family, community, and hoped-for futures. It meant accompaniment of those journeying through asylum processes, those facing isolation and times of overwhelming despair, those for whom no meaning could be made of the humiliation, no cohesive narrative made of the rejection.

It meant the presence in the absence- that Sahar and Rana, Hamdan and Ashraf were held in thought and heart, daily, with the same urgency that the thousands of publicly unnamed women, men and children were and are- their bodies floating, tugging at the borders of

¹⁰ <https://vimeo.com/168365310>

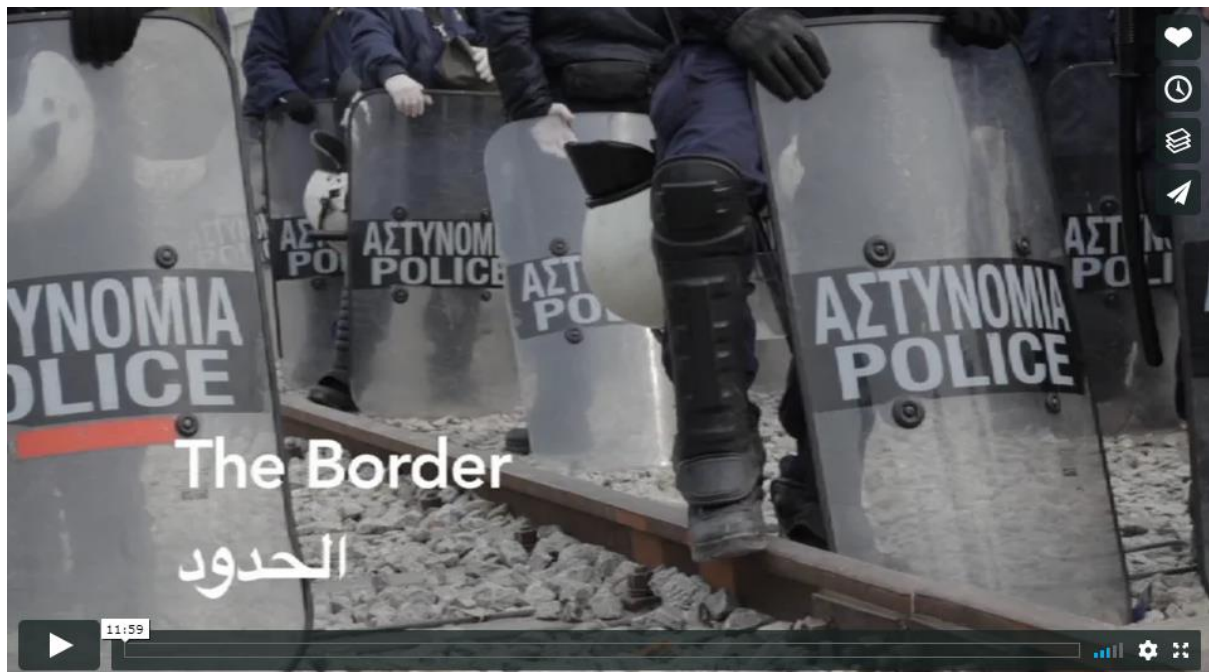
¹¹ <https://vimeo.com/224960822>

¹² <https://vimeo.com/182161070>

consciousness and spirit- reminding, always, of collective accountability- of the consequences of complacency and inaction. It meant, and means, dreams of water, of hands slipping out of grip, of the inability to protect those mourned and loved, in absence. It means the necessary, conscious response- that of advocacy and action, and of attempting to make narratives present, heard, held and injustice named.

Video vignettes and archiving a handful of stories amongst the hundreds of thousands of those on the move change little, in practical or material terms. But archives form part of a collective memory, and memory prevents the reduction of complex narratives into diminished representations. In contexts where representations of internal life and process, of the search for cohesive narrative during ebbing tides of displacement receive little archival focus, the impetus for accountable ethnographies of exile remains. In the future those journeys will be remembered, recorded, theorised and given creative, life-affirming representational form by many of the young people who are now moving across land and sea borders, by those who survive. Until then, those of us who witness hold space for the urgent truths of those who navigate the journey.

THE BORDER



vimeo.com/168365310

FREEDOM



vimeo.com/224960822

REFUGE



vimeo.com/182161070

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¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caoimhe_Butterly