

(In)Visibility: On the Doorstep of a Mediatized Refugees' Squat

Original

(In)Visibility: On the Doorstep of a Mediatized Refugees' Squat / Giudici, D. (IMISCOE RESEARCH SERIES). - In: IMISCOE Research Series[s.]. : Springer Science and Business Media B.V., 2023. - ISBN 978-3-031-23124-7. - pp. 137-152 [10.1007/978-3-031-23125-4_8]

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2981618 since: 2023-09-04T20:18:22Z

Publisher:

Springer Science and Business Media B.V.

Published

DOI:10.1007/978-3-031-23125-4_8

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(In)Visibility. On the doorstep of a mediatized refugees' squat

Giudici, Daniela

2023-01-01

Abstract

Migrants' squats often inhabit marginal and "out of sight" urban areas, placed at the intersection of institutional neglect and alternative strategies for self-managed living. Yet, at times, migrants' informal settlements become highly visible places, as they can find themselves in the spotlight as symbols of governmental failure and urban decay. This chapter reflects on hurdles and conundrums of negotiating access as a researcher within such a place. It is based on a number of ethnographic encounters that took place at "Ex-MOI", a housing squat in Turin's abandoned Olympic Village that became catalyst of local anxieties, as well as of national xenophobic propaganda. Entering a housing squat, inhabited by documented and undocumented migrants, is nothing but obvious. This task was complicated by an intense mediatic attention - experienced as deeply violent by the squat's residents - as well as by an imminent eviction, which entailed heightened precarity and suspicion. Yet, this scenario offers a fertile perspective to look at some underlying aspects of the ethnographic encounter, such as the refusal of the research subject to be "domesticated" for academic purposes, the ambivalent role of different kind gatekeepers, as well as cross-gender dynamics within fieldwork. Moreover, as the housing squat was mainly inhabited by male African migrants, this chapter seeks also to reflect on the implications of conducting ethnography as an instantly "visible presence", that of a white woman in a predominantly black masculine setting.

Scheda breve Scheda completa Scheda completa (DC)

Presenza di coautori internazionali (International coauthors)

no

Nazionalità degli autori (Author/s' nationality)

ITALIA

Referaggio (Peer review)

Esperti anonimi

Curatore/i del libro (Book editor)

Boccagni, Paolo; Bonfanti, Sara

Titolo del libro (Book title)

Migration and Domestic Space. Ethnographies of Home in the Making

Luogo di edizione (Place of publication)

New York

Casa editrice (Publisher)

Springer OA

Collana (Series)

IMISCOE RESEARCH SERIES

ISBN

978-3-031-23127-8

URL<https://link.springer.com/book/9783031231247>**Lingua (Language)**

Inglese

Titolo del progetto e/o altre informazioni (Project title and/or other information)

MIUR-FARE HOASI Research Project

Tipologia

02 Contributo in volume (Part of a book)::02.1 Saggio su volume miscelaneo o Capitolo di libro (Essay or Book Chapter)

Tipologia

info:eu-repo/semantics/bookPart

Numero autori

1

Fulltext

none

Tutti gli autori

Giudici, Daniela

Utilizza questo identificativo per citare o creare un link a questo documento:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11572/361963>

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Citazioni

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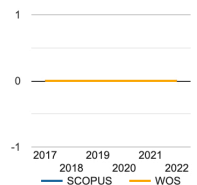
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Chapter 7

(In)Visibility: On the Doorstep of a Mediatized Refugees' Squat



Daniela Giudici

It is a warm and sunny afternoon in the Spring of 2019, and I am visiting the refugees' squat for the first time. The housing squat, locally known as Ex MOI, is located in a peripheral and impoverished neighborhood of Turin. It consists of four buildings, two of them with doors and windows sealed after a recent eviction (see Fig. 7.1). In between the buildings there is a wide yard, where several young men are hanging out. Some of them are chatting or playing soccer, while others are busy wrapping secondhand appliances waiting to be delivered to their countries of origin. I am accompanied by Francesco,¹ a photographer and long-term activist in the squat, who knows many inhabitants and starts chatting with some of them. Then Marco, an activist engaged in the occupation since its very beginning, shows up with a young man, whom I quickly discover to be another researcher. Someone cracks a joke, saying that it is difficult to be in such a place without the presence of one or more researchers. The African inhabitants of the buildings rapidly leave our group and go back to their daily activities. A volunteer from MSF also shows up. [...] A couple of hours later, I walk back to the wide street that faces the occupied buildings. There I see two military vehicles. Francesco tells me they are always parked there, day and night. Then I meet two Italian students, who are wandering around with a lost attitude. "We want to shoot a documentary", they tell me. "But something more introspective, different from the usual activist denunciation" (Fieldnotes; April 2019).

¹All names have been changed, in order to protect research participant's anonymity.

D. Giudici (✉)
Università di Trento, Trento, Italy
e-mail: daniela.giudici@unitn.it



Fig. 7.1 A door bricked up after the eviction of one of the squat's buildings. Next to it, a graffiti reads: "Home is peacefulness. Rights for everybody". (Author's picture)

7.1 Introduction

I have been involved in research in the field of asylum and humanitarianism in Italy since 2010 and, yet, only after 2015 did I feel that the field sites I was trying to approach were so intensely populated and "over-researched" (Neal et al., 2016). In fact, in the wake of the European "refugee crisis", housing squats like ex-MOI have turned into popular field sites that lure journalists, humanitarians, researchers and funding bodies (Cabot, 2019; Dadusc et al., 2019; Rozakou, 2019). Drawing on some encounters that took place at the doorstep of a refugees' squat between April and July 2019, this chapter engages with a reflection on the ethical and political dilemmas of ethnographically approaching such a place in times of "migration crisis" (De Genova, 2017). Entering a housing squat, inhabited by documented and undocumented migrants, is nothing but obvious. A refugees' squat is in fact a kind of home, albeit often precarious, marginal and temporary (Lafazani, 2018; Lancione, 2020). In my case, this task was complicated by an intense mediatic attention – experienced as deeply violent by the squat's residents – as well as by an imminent eviction, which entailed a heightened sense of precarity and suspicion. The housing squat evoked overlapping histories of social and spatial abandonment. It came to represent, in political and media narratives, a symbol of governmental failure and urban decay. It consisted of four buildings originally erected to host athletes and

journalists during the 2006 Winter Olympics and then left abandoned. Built specifically for that event, the village included a series of large, modern concrete buildings painted blue, orange and grey, lined up alongside the train tracks on the border with Lingotto – a former industrial area in the Southern part of the city. Those buildings, locally known as ex-MOI,² were left to crumble after the end of the Olympics. They were later occupied in March 2013 by a group of refugees supported by a network of local activists.

In light of an increased mediatic and academic attention to migration and refugees, a renewed critical engagement with research access, power relations and ethical responsibilities within fieldwork seems to be particularly necessary. The recent scholarly fascination around issues of refugees and displacement risks reproducing the pitfalls of “crisis” as a social imaginary and as a dominant explanatory frame, which informs both our understanding and our responses to particular historical circumstances (Roitman, 2014; Vigh, 2008). As Heath Cabot recently argued, anthropological enhanced interest in refugees may risk participating in crisis-chasing, that is, the propensity to take crisis as a driver of scholarship; assuming that ‘refugees experiences’ need to be studied; and, finally, heeding the call to ‘do good’ through scholarship in ways that deflect attention from anthropology’s own politics of life” (Cabot, 2019: 262). Following this call for a renewed reflexivity in times and spaces of “crisis”, I reflect on the methodological and ethical implications of doing ethnography in a migrant informal settlement besieged by journalists, researchers and humanitarians.

The issue of self-reflexivity has been introduced in anthropological research in the 70s (Scholte, 1972; Briggs, 1970) and reached full bloom in the 80s (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989). Embedded in a broader shift of anthropology from a “scientist” approach to an “interpretative” one, the idea of self-reflexivity mainly refers to an increased awareness of the ethnographer’s own positionality within fieldwork. This may include an explicit account of the complex process of entering a specific research field, as well as an engagement with the politics of representation and the “landscapes of power in which we, as researchers, are embedded” (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016). Yet, while the issue of self-reflexivity has been embraced by most ethnographers, critics recently note that it is often used in an instrumental manner, as a device intended to invite the reader’s trust, but deployed merely to authenticate one’s work (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Coffey, 1999; Geschiere, 2010).

In this chapter I interrogate a quite common, but rather underexplored, issue of ethnographic research: how should we understand research participants’ indifference, reluctance, if not open hostility to the process of academic research itself? In other words: how to understand their refusal to be “domesticated” for academic purposes? Whereas asymmetric power relations within fieldwork are often made explicit, research participants’ “resistance” to the very process of ethnographic research is rarely openly debated. By addressing the interplay between visibility

²The name comes from the former wholesale fruit market (*Mercati Ortofrutticoli all’Ingrosso*) that was once the area’s main landmark.

and invisibility on the doorstep of a very peculiar domestic context – a refugees' squat – I reflect on my own role as a white female ethnographer, as well as on broader methodological and ethical issues that go beyond the question of access. I argue that a self-reflexive awareness may be an opportunity to engage more deeply not only with the researcher's side, but also with our "informants'" practices, feelings, and intentions. Indeed, the issue I want to explore here is not only how ethnographers aware of the politics of representation may end up silencing, circumscribing or amplifying particular refugees' voices (Cabot, 2016). Rather, it is also about how ethnographers should understand and perhaps acknowledge research participants' willingness to stay silent or invisible. Those "strategies of invisibility" (Rygiel, 2011), often enacted by migrants living in informal or irregular conditions, have important implications when it comes to the task of entering and exploring the private and intimate sphere of the domestic. Furthermore, those strategies, while most of the times implicit, have something to say about the multiple "constellations of home" constituted by displaced migrants (Brun & Fábos, 2015). This approach is in line with the recent scholarly attention to silences and "the unsaid" as actual social actions and, thus, appropriate objects of social research to be carefully interpreted (Murray & Durrheim, 2019). If representing the "voices" and experiences of ethnographic subjects – in particular, the marginalized ones – has been a longstanding task of ethnographic research, what remains unsaid emerges as a slippery but very powerful dimension of human sociality. Not everybody is entitled to speak up (Spivak, 1988), but maybe not everybody *wants* to speak up, at least in some specific setting and to some specific interlocutors (Simpson, 2007). By refusing to be domesticated for academic purposes, refugees may indeed enact something that anthropologists working with marginal groups often seek actively to retrace, namely, their political agency.

7.2 Overlapping Histories of Abandonment

I became interested in the refugee squat in Turin in 2019, in the framework of a research project focused on home experiences and housing pathways of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy.³ When my colleague and I decided to approach the squat, we aspired to conduct ethnographic research, if not proper participant observation, in a big informal settlement and gain some insights on everyday life in such a place. Furthermore, as the squat was threatened by an imminent eviction, we also planned to examine the perspectives of different social actors on the squat experience, its upcoming conclusion and aftermath.

Most of the squat inhabitants were holding a regular residency permit (in most cases "humanitarian protection") and had arrived in Italy between 2011 and 2012.

³The HOASI (Home and Asylum Seekers in Italy) project, based at the University of Trento. Fieldwork in Turin was conducted in collaboration with my colleague Enrico Fravega.

In that period, following the so-called Arab Spring and a consistent increase in migrant boat landings, the Italian government set up a short-lived and largely inadequate reception program (“North Africa Emergency”), through a network of temporary reception centers across the country (Campesi, 2011; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013). In this respect, it is noteworthy that the reification of the crisis – to which the scholarly literature has certainly contributed – tends to neglect the historical continuities that have produced, the current adversities that migrants face (Cabot, 2019). In Italy, for example, a chronic emergency rationale seems to be a landmark of migration and border management, at least for the last twenty years (Campesi, 2011; Albahari, 2015). After the abrupt end of the “Emergency North Africa” program in 2013, many refugees in Italy suddenly found themselves on the streets. In the city of Turin many of them, mostly with humanitarian visas, found themselves without job, accommodation or future prospects and resorted to squatting in the area of the abandoned Olympic village (Bolzoni et al., 2015; Stopani & Pampuro, 2018). As an activist involved in the occupation since its very beginning explained:

The main reason why we chose to occupy this place is that... well, there was space obviously but, apart from that, there was a striking parallelism between those buildings' abandonment and refugees' abandonment. Public money was stolen and wasted in those buildings and, in the same way, public money was stolen and wasted in ruinous asylum reception projects. (Marco,⁴ 35, Italian activist)

The dwelling conditions inside the squat were extremely poor, with the majority of inhabitants living in large rooms hosting up to thirty people, lack of proper kitchens and no hot water or heating.

Many of the squats' inhabitants were complaining about this:

It's just not possible to live in these conditions. I am thankful that I have a bridge over my head, but a room with 30 people...you can understand it. It just drives you crazy. (Victor, 23, Nigeria)

However, ex-MOI rapidly became home to dozens of nationalities and was repeatedly referred to, in national and international media, as one of the “biggest refugees' squat in Europe”, with peaks of over 1400 people living inside its four buildings.⁵ One of its overcrowded buildings, built to accommodate fewer than 100 athletes, was home to as many as 500 people. During the years of occupation ex-MOI became “a city in the city” (with two pop-up barber shops, several small stores, a school of Italian, etc.), as well as a sort of information hub and temporary shelter for many migrants moving between different Italian and European cities in search of work opportunities.

⁴All names and some recognizable details have been changed to protect research participants' identity. Interviews have been conducted in Italian and then translated by the author.

⁵The group was always quite heterogeneous, with people coming from 28 different sub-saharan African countries. In the first years of the occupation there was also a large presence of women and children, but not during our fieldwork. Indeed, in 2019 two of the four buildings had already been cleared by eviction orders and the most vulnerable segment of the squatting population have been relocated elsewhere.

7.3 Unsettled Homes

My first contact with the housing squat came through Francesco, a photographer and activist, engaged in a long-term photographic project within Ex-MOI. As he explained, the process of getting access inside the squat had not been an easy one for him either:

At first I started volunteering in the Italian school. It was also a sort of “visual” issue. Because ex-MOI was really a small African city inside Turin. And let’s put it bluntly, I was white, and all the refugees were African black guys. You could really feel the color of your skin there. So, I tried to make them familiar with my presence. [...] I always introduced myself as a photographer to everybody I met. But I did not take any photographs for several months. I mean, even if it was a squatted place, that was their home. *And you cannot just take pictures in someone’s home.*

In popular and humanitarian discourse, refugees have often been portrayed as “uprooted”, chronically detached from a taken for granted territorial belonging, a lost home that will never return (Malkki, 1992). As a matter of fact, refugees often find themselves living in conditions of “protracted displacement” (Brun, 2015), as they spend years in transit between different countries and cities, waiting for documents, struggling to build meaningful lives and livelihoods in a new and often hostile environment. Yet, the increasing scholarly interest in home has led to a critical scrutiny of idealized notions of displacement and belonging, thereby producing a more complex understanding of home as an “unsettled, changing, open and more mobile entity” (Brun & Fábos, 2015: 7). In this light, refugees’ temporary housing arrangements presents a fertile field to study home as a precarious arena constituted by multiple social actors, feelings, places, and projects (Ahmed et al., 2003). In fact, a more dynamic and open-ended understanding of home opens the way to tracking some forms of homemaking even within challenging and difficult contexts, such as informal settlements and squats.

While not being a conventional “domestic space”, Ex-MOI retained some fundamental attributes of a home-like environment, in that it embodied material belongings, (semi)private spaces, personal relationships and often ambivalent emotional attachments (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Boccagni, 2017). For example, the ground floor of one of the occupied buildings, while being a passageway to the stairs that brought to the collective rooms, was a multi-functional space, rich of personal belongings, meaningful objects, and decorations. On one side there was a small makeshift café with colorful curtains and posters hanging on the wall. On the other side, a big room leading to a storage place was painted with murals and African flags. Several people were often hanging out on the ground floor of the building, some of them chatting, laughing, ranging stuff, preparing coffees, etc. The courtyard between the buildings also constituted a surprising assemblage of people and things. In particular, the yard landscape was dominated by discarded metal that some squats’ inhabitants were collecting for resale, and by second-hand appliances, carefully wrapped to be sent as presents to families back in African countries. The constant presence of packages and appliances to be dispatched to the countries of origin evoked the multiple, material and “transnational” nature of home, as those objects

were indeed allowing the nurturing of bonds with distant loved ones (Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013). All in all, the personal appropriation and decoration of spaces, which was ubiquitous inside and around Ex-MOI buildings, reflected “pattern of regular doing, furnishing and appurtenances” (Douglas, 1991: 290), which fashion and reproduce the domain of the domestic. Geographers have long argued that acts of homemaking are intrinsically political, as home is a porous place at the intersections between the public and the private, the domestic and the political (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Massey, 2013). In this sense, ex MOI was a precarious shelter, but still not as temporary or uncontrollable as, for instance, an asylum reception center. In fact, state-run centers and institutional accommodations are often neutral spaces with limited room for autonomy, personal interventions or appropriations. While living in an institutional reception centre gives access to basic services and infrastructures, asylum seekers’ lack of control over material spaces, biographical and everyday time may hinder the possibility of taking control over their living spaces, and their lives (Dadusc et al., 2019; Thorshaug & Brun, 2019). In contrast, self-organized settlements such as ex MOI, although lacking decent housing infrastructures, can become sites of a plurality of sometimes ambiguous attachments and relationships. Through the materiality of the built environment, objects and everyday practices, migrants at ex MOI were indeed enacting a domestic dimension and a sense of control over their lives, even within conditions of extreme precarity and deprivation.

The ex-MOI buildings were open, with no lockers or closed doors at the main entrances. In this sense, the housing squat was an open and semi-public space, potentially crossed by anyone. Yet, it was still very difficult to enter without being invited or noticed. On the one hand, the constant menace of being displaced was a defining feature of that dwelling environment. On the other hand, ex MOI constituted a predominantly black setting, in which the consolidated minority-majority relations of an Italian city were reversed. Hence, as I will detail further, the housing squat was immersed in a landscape, and a research field, where normative emotional geographies of *whiteness* and *blackness* were destabilised (Faria & Mollett, 2016). Since the very beginning of the occupation, the housing squat came to represent a source of anxiety and negative representations, as well as a target of intense mediatic attention at the local and national scale. The European migration “crisis” obviously stressed further this biased interest. At the time of our study (between March and July 2019) the squat was once again in the spotlight, because of an upcoming eviction and a highly controversial relocation project for its inhabitants (Belloni et al., 2020). This entailed a heightened sense of precarity and suspicion towards “outsiders”.

7.4 (In)Visibility

It is my second time at the refugees’ squat, and I am accompanied by my colleague and Francesco, our main “gatekeeper”. It is a sunny afternoon, and we are sitting in the yard trying to look both relaxed and discreet. Yet, as the housing squat is mainly inhabited by

African male migrants, I quickly realize that, rather than observing, I feel intensely observed. We are the only white persons around and I sense our “instantly visible” presence in that landscape. This awkward feeling is somehow complicated by me being the only woman around, in a predominantly male setting. Some guys approach me, asking if I am married to one of my friends. A group of young men is staring at us, with a suspicious and puzzled attitude. At some point, a man who is playing soccer says loudly: “White men, go back home!” Then, a friend of Francesco comes and invites us inside the building to drink a cup of coffee. (Fieldnotes; April 2019)

After many years of disrespectful mediatic attention and multiple incursions from different social actors (local politicians, journalists, social workers, humanitarians, researchers) who, in most cases, the squat inhabitants could not tell from each other, some refugees had started reacting with an openly hostile attitude towards newcomers. Whereas only a tiny minority of the residents showed unwelcoming attitudes, a mixture of suspicion and indifference seemed to be the most common reaction towards outsiders, in a space that was at once public and domestic. Interestingly, the dismissive attitude of some inhabitants pushed a friend of our gatekeeper to open the door of the squat and let us in. He invited us to the big room on the ground floor of the building, which served as a storage room for common provisions, but also hosted his own bedroom and living space. That was a semi-private area of the informal settlement, usually kept far from external eyes, but well known by Francesco, who had gained a “trusted outsider” role (Bucerius, 2013). Unlike the young men who were hanging out in the yard, Lamin (Francesco’s friend) was very welcoming, offering us coffee and cookies, while also telling us – in a mostly sad and hopeless tone – about the hardships of his life in Italy.

Racialized relationships and, in particular, historically-situated perceptions of *whiteness* powerfully shape field research and knowledge production (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Faria & Mollett, 2016). Several scholars have highlighted how whiteness, because of its status of normal, natural, non-category, is often taken for granted and thus becomes invisible (Bonnett, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2012). However, being at ex-MOI as a white person meant to feel like an instantly visible presence, in an interesting reversal of the ordinary experience in a city of the Global North. As Faria and Mollett (2016) argued, paying critical attention to processes of racialization within fieldwork means also to complicate normative assumptions of white researchers being always in a position of power over research participants. In fact, bodies associated with colonizing pasts or presents can evoke not only privilege and authority but also prompt suspicion or disdain.

The perception of being observed – rather than observing – was intensified by me being a woman in a predominantly male setting. In this sense, while trying to get access to refugees’ temporary and marginal “homes”, I was also experiencing a powerful feeling of *uncanniness*, a destabilizing point of slippage between the homely and the unhomely (Ahmed et al., 2003). Feminist epistemologies have long addressed positionality and power relations across lines of gender, ethnicity and class within field sites (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990; Behar & Gordon, 1995). In this vein, female ethnographers in male-dominated settings have highlighted how gender and sexuality have a significant impact on both *what* we see and *how* we come

to see it (Orrico, 2015: 474; see also Coffey, 1999). Notwithstanding the multiple challenges of this kind of setting, several studies argued that there could be also “advantages”, either because of normative stereotypes of women as “unthreatening” or “good listeners” (Grenz, 2005; Pini, 2005), or through the acquisition of an outsider role with insider knowledge (Bucerius, 2013). In my previous research experiences, I often came to realise that the development of trust with research participants did not necessarily depend on insider status. Yet, building relationships of mutual trust requires time and my presence at ex-MOI was in fact too short, as I will explain. However, through my ostensibly visible presence in the field and the kind of reactions it engendered, I became increasingly aware of my own politics of representation, as well as of the multi-layered significance of (in)visibility within such a space.

Migrants' squat experiences have been often analysed in terms of “politics of presence” (Darling, 2017) or, in other words, as an embodied taking-up of the public space of the city. By *being there*, in public space, and by *being seen* to be there (McNevin, 2012: 167) migrants enact citizenship rights even when they are excluded from them (Isin, 2009). Hence, according to this perspective, the political subjectivity of migrants is constituted precisely through representation and visibility (see also Rancière, 1999). However, other scholars have argued that political subjectivity can be achieved also via invisible means. Migrants, especially those with an irregular status, often attempt to stay “out of sight”, in order to circumvent governmental techniques of classification and control (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Giudici, 2013). Invisibility becomes an essential strategy in the everyday life of illegalized migrants, as Kim Rygiel has elucidated: “If visibility and voice are a key part of the struggles of some irregular migrant group... others have found it necessary to navigate the increasingly restrictive regime of border controls through strategies of disembodiment and invisibility” (Rygiel, 2011: 157).

Even though most of ex-MOI's inhabitants held a regular residency permit, the issue of (in)visibility was a crucial one in their case too. On the one hand, as Ananya Roy argued, urban informality highlights the “ever-shifting urban relationship between the legal and the illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized” (Roy, 2011: 233). On the other hand, a composite interplay between autonomy and exploitation, resistance and marginalization, pride and shame was a constitutive element of life experiences within the refugees' squat. To a closer look, the issue of (in)visibility had also more subjective and emotional implications. According to Francesco, many refugees were experiencing a deep sense of shame at the idea of being possibly seen by friends and relatives in their country of origin, while living in such a marginalized and run-down place. The fear of being seen, mainly through social media, had also hindered his long-term photographic project, as he explains:

I often gave them some prints of my work at the squat. However, refugees were mostly worried that some photographs could be uploaded on social networks and, thus, seen by their relatives and friends at home, in Africa. They don't want them to see how they live here in Italy. Their relatives have no idea of their real situation here.

7.5 Resisting Observation

In order to portray the intense – and not always well-received – attention towards some specific marginal communities, some scholars and activists have talked about “research fatigue” (Clark, 2008; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). This is commonly understood as a feeling of exhaustion and exasperation by communities and individuals who receive sustained attention from social scientists, and yet have not felt any positive effects from this attention (Wajsberg, 2020: 129). Ex-MOI’s inhabitants were probably suffering from that kind of fatigue, very much related to the temporality of the crisis, which made border crossers into targets of policing, intervention and study (Cabot, 2019). A feeling of exhaustion and stuckedness permeated more generally their life experiences in Italy. As Lamin commented while offering us some coffee:

It’s been seven years that I’ve lived here and it’s always the same. No real job, no real house. It is as if I never got off that boat.

Lamin’s words evoke a sense of deep hopelessness that is at odds with the view of migration as a form of physical mobility in search of existential mobility (Hage, 2009). As I previously mentioned, the complex task of gaining research access to the housing squat was complicated by intense mediatic attention, experienced as deeply violent by the refugees. In local news, ex-MOI was often described as a “hell on earth” (*inferno sceso in terra*). Incursions from journalists and politicians were an everyday affair, as the governmental pressure to evict the refugees was mounting, in a political landscape of rising xenophobia (Giudici, 2021). Yet, after years of invasive mediatic attention, the squat inhabitants had started reacting to the constant presence of “external” eyes. They were doing so by temporarily confiscating the journalists’ cameras and promising to give them back only after the erasure of their memory card. As Marco explained:

If a journalist came during the day, introduced himself quietly, first without cameras, the guys would certainly talk to him. But what they mostly do is to come during the evening or night, without even asking, just to craft another deceptive and sensationalist picture of this place. Well, it’s obvious that the inhabitants started reacting. In the end, this is their home, and you don’t act like that in somebody else’s home.

As a matter of fact, as I was trying to become acquainted with some of the ex-MOI inhabitants for research purposes, I started feeling increasingly uncomfortable. I was questioning my position in such a space, the unavoidable responsibilities of whatever account I could possibly produce, as well as refugees’ generalized reluctance to be scrutinized by external eyes – mine included. By entering this space as a researcher, I had to acknowledge my own role in the accumulation of frustration and fatigue, even while I was trying to document refugees’ voices and experiences (Wajsberg, 2020). Someone might say that a sensitive ethnographer would have a very different approach in such a context. In fact, I was trained to think that these hardships were part of the “ethnographer’s job” and that the initial resistances would have been overcome through the building of relationships of intimacy and mutual

trust. But what does this resistance to the “external gaze” speak about? What if we take this refusal to be “domesticated” for academic purposes seriously into account? Audra Simpson (2014), while discussing anthropological imperfect attempts of giving “voice” to Indigenous people (Mohawks), has written about how refusal and disengagement structure possibilities, as well as produce subjects, histories, and politics. She writes of refusal as shedding light on something we’ve missed:

There was something that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal – a stance, a principle, an historical narrative, and an *enjoyment in the reveal*. (Simpson, 2014: 107)

While I was trying to gain access to such a complex place, embedded in multiple histories of marginalization, struggle and solidarity, I started realizing that my presence there and my search for “people’s worlds and experiences” could also be perceived as intrusive by refugees themselves. I was feeling increasingly uncomfortable at the idea of interviewing people that I knew had been compelled to expose their biographies several times, in order to negotiate their right to stay with state institutions (Sorgoni, 2019). What was I supposed to reveal and why? Who would eventually benefit from it? I was inspired by Audra Simpson’s approach and yet, unlike her, I could not certainly say that I was doing ethnography in the familiar. On the contrary, within the squat, my gender, class and ethnicity were paradigmatic of an outsider role within fieldwork.

My own positioning entailed some margins of negotiation about research methodologies and objectives. Thus, I decided to avoid interviews with refugees, and mainly to listen, instead of “compelling” them to speak. At the same time, I started thinking about experimenting with alternative methodologies, which would eventually overcome those obstacles. With my colleague and some local activists, we tried to design a participatory project, with the aim of working on a collective memory, both visual and discursive, of the ex-MOI housing squat. However, the “foretold death” of the space – the coming eviction – which many refugees experienced with a deep sense of resignation, entailed a widespread lack of collective involvement. As a matter of fact, feelings of exhaustion and helplessness permeated also the words of local activists, even though at different scales and with different outcomes. As an activist told me:

We feel as if we are doing assisted dying here. I mean, last year many refugees were taking part in the meetings. [...] But then they realized that history was repeating itself and that they were going to face again incertitude and precarity, over and over. So, they lost any interest. (Marco, 35, Italian activist)

Eventually, the premature and fast eviction of ex-MOI in July 2019 put an early end also to my conundrums and attempts of conducting fieldwork there. However, those strategies, everyday resistances and silences became, retrospectively, profoundly telling. On the one hand, they pointed to the need of a deeper engagement with the methodological and ethical implications of doing ethnographic research within such a peculiar domestic context. On the other hand, they signaled the presence of different implicit thresholds, which marked the “stubborn everyday strategies” (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019) through which refugees were attempting at building homely spaces and forms of belonging, even from uncanny and marginal positions. In this sense,

my own internal conflicts over the purpose, benefits and ethics of the research process were not unconstructive. They made me aware of the need for highly flexible, and possibly participatory, approaches within such a context, as well as providing insights on emerging, albeit precarious acts of homemaking.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

In order to seek to avoid the major pitfalls embedded in doing fieldwork in times of “crisis-chasing” (Cabot, 2019), we certainly need more reflexive accounts of ethnography as an affective, embodied and historical encounter. And yet accounts of self-reflexivity may risk being used in an instrumental manner, thereby avoiding taking seriously into account the issues they were supposed to tackle. In other words, accounts of self-reflexivity can become a sort of panacea, a device deployed to authenticate one’s work. They can end concealing – rather than revealing – the tensions and dissonances between different priorities, vocabularies and forms of representation within fieldwork (Simpson, 2007). In this sense, I share Peter Geschiere’s concerns that in the self-reflexive turn there is a risk of paying too much attention only to the researcher’s side and, paradoxically, of producing monological, if not narcissistic accounts (Geschiere, 2010).

Yet, trying to access a refugees’ squat – at once a public and private environment – as a white female researcher entails shifting emotional reactions and representations, which should not be dismissed. In this vein, Laliberté and Schurr (2016) recently argued that a deeper exploration of the “stickiness of emotions” within fieldwork holds the potential of reinvigorating practices of reflexivity and positionality. It also challenges the reification of consolidated categories of otherness. In fact, a critical awareness of racialized emotional geographies within field sites not only enables a more robust understanding of non-linear power dynamics embedded in the research encounter but offers also a space “for the recognition of other kinds of agency and authority among those with whom we work, learn from, and otherwise interact” (Faria & Mollett, 2016: 88). As I claim, a critical engagement with emotions in the field may prevent us from reproducing romanticised views of occupations as unambiguous spaces of autonomy, political claim and self-determination (Raimondi, 2019). At the same time, it can also open a space for recognition of unexpected, and maybe troublesome, forms of agency of our “research participants”.

Anthropological studies of forced migration and international aid have long critiqued the de-politicizing ethos of humanitarianism, by underscoring the exclusionary and potentially violent nature of humanitarian practices. Yet, as Heath Cabot (2019) poignantly notes, both anthropological and humanitarian thinking seem to be grounded in a paternalistic fascination for the “suffering other” (see also Robbins, 2013). On the one hand, anthropologists themselves may risk enacting their “own politics of life: a hierarchization of which people, things, situations, and places are worthy or deserving of study” (Cabot, 2019: 251). On the other hand, ethnographies of migration may become complicit in reproducing the same reified identities they

attempt at scrutinizing with their critical work (Rozakou, 2019). Furthermore, I argue, ethnographic accounts of migration may risk overlooking what they often seek actively to retrace, namely the political possibilities emerging from marginal positions. In fact, refusals and silences do tell us something: they act as a critique toward official forms of recognition and representation, including academic ones (Simpson, 2007). In this respect, Shahram Khosravi (2018) insisted on migrants' "right to opacity" in encounters with researchers or, in other words, the right not to be known and represented (Besteman, 2014). Ex-MOI's residents, by actively deflecting external eyes and narratives, may enact this kind of political agency. Their search for invisibility and their resistance to the "ethnographic gaze" can be interpreted as more or less explicit attempts at re-gaining control over the representation of their lives.

Finally, their claim for a space of invisibility and privacy evokes their – albeit precarious and contested – attempts at making a home; of building and maintaining a sense of identity and self-worth, even from within marginal positions. In contrast with nationalist notions of homeland, Brun and Fábos refer to making homes as the ways in which people try to gain control over their lives, and which involves negotiating particular regimes assistance, and the control over specific locations and material structures (Brun & Fábos, 2015: 14). Refugees' resistance to external gazes was also a way to exert some degree of control over their domestic space and, thus, demarcate some legitimization of their rights to home. In this context, the recurrent intrusions of journalists in those "unsettled homes" were pointing at the stigma faced by some subjects, ultimately seen as less deserving of homemaking opportunities. Thus, places like ex-MOI remind us that home is a porous place, constituted at the intersection between domestic and political worlds (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Massey, 1994). The everyday forms of agency embedded in homemaking practices are rarely identified as political – least of all by those enacting them. Yet, acts of homemaking are intrinsically political, in that they are shaped by governance practices and, in turn, actively impact wider politics.

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