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Researching Precarious Migrations: Qualitative Strategies Toward a Positive Transformation of the Politics of Migration¹

Short title: Researching Precarious Migrations

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Abstract

How can research contribute to a positive transformation of the politics of migration? This article addresses the question with reference to a recent research project, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*, which maps and documents the journeys and experiences of people on the move across the Mediterranean. It explores how qualitative research engaging research participants as people with the authority to speak can affect change by exposing claims and demands that compel ‘receiving communities’ to bear witness to the contemporary violence of policies and practices. Exploring the dissemination strategy of sharing stories through interactive maps and research-art collaboration, the article emphasises the importance of strategies that foster constructive connections between diverse constituencies. This, the article argues, involves a process of translation that goes beyond a form of passive empathy, and that works toward positive transformation of a slower duration, albeit in terms that remain discomfoting.

Figures, tables, charts: 3

Key words: migration, stories, art, empathy

Introduction

Contemporary migration politics are not only characterised by rising numbers of displaced persons (UNHCR 2017). They are also marked by practices of containment (Brown 2010; Jones 2012; Taziolli 2017) and abandonment (Heller and Pezzani 2015), which render people precarious (Squire forthcoming) while dehumanising those on the move (Vaughan-Williams 2017). Given that policy initiatives continue to fail in preventing increasing border deaths (Spijkerboer 2007, 2013, 2017), scholars in the fields of migration and border studies face a pressing question: How can research contribute to a positive transformation of the politics of migration, in order that death and vulnerability no longer dominate the experiences of people on the move? This article charts some of the ways in which researchers have responded to this question, focusing in particular on works that relate to precarious migrations across the Mediterranean Sea by boat. It then goes on to develop an approach that emphasises both a qualitative research methodology that is grounded in an appreciation of people on the move as having claims and demands which are important to consider in the formation of policy, as well as a dissemination strategy that fosters constructive connections between ‘new arrivals’ and ‘receiving communities’. The case for such an approach is developed with reference to a specific research project that maps and documents the journeys and experiences of people on the move to the EU through the Mediterranean via North Africa and Turkey: *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*.

In discussing the project’s qualitative methodology and dissemination strategy, this article does not pose one research strategy or set of research strategies as superior to others. Rather, it aims to reflect on the distinctive dimensions of the qualitative research of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*, precisely in order to contribute to a discussion of how research can contribute to positive transformation in the field of migration politics. This is important in order to move beyond the current impasse, in which border deaths have become the norm and in which humanitarian or charitable responses to migration are ineffective in challenging the violent effects of contemporary policies (Squire 2015, 2017a). The article suggests that the qualitative approach developed in *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* is distinctive because it facilitates engagement with research participants as people with the authority to speak about migratory dynamics and policy effects. It explores how, on the basis of this, a dissemination strategy of story sharing through interactive mapping facilitates the formation of constructive connections between people on the move and ‘receiving communities’, based on a practice of bearing witness that demands collective responsibility for the production of death and vulnerability. This not only marks the research approach of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* out from quantitative research that operates in terms that objectify people on the move, but also from qualitative research that simply seeks to re-humanise through strategies such as storytelling. In sharing stories through interactive mapping *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* goes further, the article argues, because it enables appreciation of the claims and demands that are made on the basis of precarious journeys and experiences, while contributing to the creation of conditions for positive change by grounding the connections between diverse constituencies in relations of equality and respect.

Qualitative research and a transformation of the politics of migration

How can research contribute to the positive transformation of the politics of migration? And why is such research important? In an academic context whereby the value of impactful research has taken on increasing significance, and in a political context whereby both policy

and wider public responses have created the conditions for death and vulnerability, an increasing range of scholars have become concerned to find ways to affect change (see also Garrelli and Tazzioli 2013). In relation to the so-called Mediterranean ‘migration crisis’, some have undertaken research in collaboration with international agencies and non-governmental organisations in order to initiate practical transformation in areas such as identifying the deceased (e.g. Mediterranean Missing 2016). Others have married ‘no border’ activism with research in order to directly affect change on the ground – or ‘at sea’ – such as initiatives that support practices of search and rescue (e.g. Stierl 2016; Heller and Pezzani 2013, 2015; Sossi 2013). Others still have supplemented research activities with creative programmes to facilitate change, such as inclusive humanitarian or labour initiatives that provide alternatives to dangerous routes of passage for people on the move.² In a range of different ways, scholars have thus played an important role in contributing to what we can identify as a positive transformation in the field of migration politics, specifically in terms that challenge a situation whereby death and vulnerability form the dominant experiences of people on the move.

In addition to these diverse approaches to research activities, scholars have employed a variety of means by which to disseminate research findings in order to affect change. Some have focused on more conventional ‘impact activities’, including the dissemination of findings to policy audiences (e.g. Crawley et al 2016; Ansems et al 2016) and the publicising of this via mass media outlets (e.g. Dearden 2016). These activities have often been complemented by the publication of online blogs and publicly-accessible journal articles (e.g. Ansem de Vries and Welander 2016; McMahon 2016; Tazzioli and Garrelli 2016; Vradis 2016), as well as by the presentation of research findings via podcasts (e.g. Sigona 2016). Others have complemented more conventional academic outputs with the engagement of creative media, in particular through the use of documentary film-making techniques to share research findings with wider audiences (e.g. Parker 2016; Kovras and Robbins 2016; Kirtsoglou 2017). The production and dissemination of these diverse outputs signal a concern with affecting a positive transformation in relation to precarious migrations to Europe across the Mediterranean specifically, which is the primary focus of this article. Yet despite the wide-ranging and admirable efforts on the part of scholars in the field, a securitised response to migration remains prevalent (New Keywords Collective 2016). This poses a serious challenge for scholars who are concerned with contributing to a positive transformation of the politics of migration.

Going further, I want to suggest that those researching precarious migrations across the Mediterranean who seek to contribute to a process of transformation face a paradox. While many may have found more resources available over recent years to participate in highly-regarded ‘impact activities’, this is by no means the same as affecting positive change. Indeed, many scholars have seen an increase in restrictive measures despite advocating for de-securitised policies and practices. It is with this in mind that this article engages the experiences of research project *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* in order to consider the distinctive contribution of qualitative research and of a dissemination strategy of story sharing through interactive mapping more specifically. Qualitative research does not always meet the criteria of ‘impactful’ research – particularly in a context where large-scale projects presenting statistical analysis are viewed as the most reliable evidence for policy-making and wider research communities.³ However, the article argues that qualitative research such as that of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* plays an important role in contributing to the creation of conditions for a positive transformation of the politics of migration, albeit in terms that are of a relatively slow duration and in terms that can have ambiguous effects. In the European and Mediterranean contexts, where experiences of death and vulnerability have intensified for people on the move over recent years, approaches that foster relations of equality and respect

between diverse constituencies are nevertheless critical. By engaging with both research participants and audiences as co-witnesses of the violent effects of policy, the article suggests that *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* highlights the importance of qualitative methods and dissemination strategies in creating the conditions for positive change. Such research, the article argues, can potentially foster affective responses that reject the violence of contemporary policies, and that create alternative relations to those grounded in fear and insecurity.

***Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* and the European Agenda**

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat is an international collaborative project that assesses EU policy in the field of migration from the perspective of people on the move directly (see Squire et al 2017). Specifically, the project applies the knowledge and understandings of people on the move in assessing the EU's redefined approach, expressed in the 2015 Commission's Communication, *A European Agenda on Migration*. The *European Agenda* emerged in response to a dramatic increase of arrival figures and in the context of what many proclaimed as a 'migration crisis' marked by increased deaths at sea. The stated aim of the *Agenda* is to "build up a coherent and comprehensive framework to reap the benefits and address the challenges deriving from migration", while responding to the "immediate imperative" to "protect those in need" (European Commission 2015, 2). In response to this challenge, the *Agenda* maps a range of key actions formulated under a four-pillar approach, including actions to: reduce the incentives for irregular migration; facilitate border management – saving lives and securing external borders; ensure Europe's duty to protect – a strong common asylum policy; and produce a new policy on legal migration.

The *European Agenda* is not a radically new policy framework, since it builds on existing initiatives. Nor does it operate in isolation from localised, EU Member State and wider global policy interventions, initiatives and agendas. Rather, the *European Agenda* can be approached as a framework that connects different policy dimensions, while enabling examination of EU policies and practices more specifically. One of the key concerns that the qualitative methodology of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* reflects is the absence of a meaningful engagement with people on the move in the formation of the *Agenda* and the development of policy more broadly. This lack of engagement also extends more widely to public debates over issues related to contemporary migration politics. Developing a qualitative methodology that takes the experiences of people on the move as a starting point in this regard enables research to take a strong stand against the absence or silencing of migratory voices in the formation of policy initiatives and in wider debates (cf. Bergold and Thomas 2012, 202). In so doing, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* contributes to wider efforts to challenge the production of precariousness, which it understands as operating through policies that produce and exacerbate various intersecting drivers and conditions of flight (Squire et al 2017).

In taking seriously the claim that *A European Agenda on Migration* is designed not only to "manage migration better" (European Commission 2015: 6) but also to "save lives" (Ibid: 3), *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* considers whether the policies that have been put in place are an effective response to the "human tragedy" of border deaths and can create a genuinely "ethical" approach based on a commitment to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Ibid: 2). The project asks: How effective are the policies associated with this *Agenda* in addressing contemporary migratory dynamics? To what extent are such policies able to address the challenges that the so-called European 'migration crisis' brought to

the fore? And how might policies be developed most effectively in order to address the challenges and tragedies that characterise the precarious situation of people on the move to the EU today? In addressing these questions the project explores the impact of EU policy interventions on people who are on the move themselves. In so doing, it approaches people who have undertaken – or plan to undertake – the precarious journey toward Europe as those who are best placed to provide insight both into the challenges that policy interventions need to address, as well as into ways in which policies can be developed to address such challenges. More than simply providing an assessment of policy developments *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* is thus a qualitative research project with a grounding in methods of ethnographic fieldwork, and which proposes a reframing of policy based on an appreciation of the claims and demands of people on the move as important in the formation of policy.

***Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* and the value of qualitative research**

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat combines site-based observational research with in-depth qualitative interviews, the latter of which are designed to assess policy developments through amplification of the voices of people on the move. In 2015 and 2016 the team conducted 257 interviews with a total of 271 participants in Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta and Turkey who had made – or who had contemplated making – the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat.⁴ Interviews were carried out in a semi-structured format, which gave thematic structure to the questioning based on the project’s overarching research questions, yet without fixing the interview too rigidly. Open-ended questions provided a guide for the individual interviewer, yet also enabled flexibility dependent on the research participant’s responses to different thematic areas of questioning (Squire et al 2017). Emphasis was on providing support to research participants to share their stories of departure, transit and arrival; to address the ways in which they made decisions and gained information throughout the migratory journey; and – critically – to draw out their experiences of and responses to policy interventions along the way. A semi-structured interview format facilitated a responsive approach, allowing participants to ‘speak back’ to the research and to share their experiences in a participatory way. This renders the project findings unique in the sense that the qualitative data produced is not replicable or standardised, but instead represents a reflexive engagement between the research team and research participants (Squire et al 2017). Moreover, it also reflects an approach that addresses policy developments in relation to the violent effects that these have for people on the move, while seeking to counter this through engaging research participants as experts in the assessment of policy initiatives (Ibid).

An intrinsic value of a qualitative research strategy such as that developed by the project *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* lies in its development of a participatory approach embedded in relations of respect and equality. There are, of course, notable limitations to the involvement of research participants in the research context in question. All marginalised groups face significant barriers to their meaningful engagement in research (cf, Pain and Francis 2003; Bergold and Thomas 2017, 197). The degree of participation is particularly limited for people on the move in precarious conditions, because research is a relatively low priority in the face of highly pressing concerns. Thus, it was not possible as with more conventional participative approaches to involve research participants in the early stages of research design. Moreover, undertaking in-depth semi-structured interviews with people in precarious social and legal situations is complex, and the difficulties of creating a ‘safe space’ for research was a significant barrier to a more engaged participative approach (see Bergold and Thomas 2012). The project team was nevertheless committed to providing a supportive

and engaged experience for research participants. Interviews usually lasted at least an hour and a half, and sometimes included follow-up support. It was not always appropriate to ask all questions on the interview schedule. In some cases, emotional issues or research fatigue was a concern, or people simply did not want to share everything with us. Hence, a flexible approach grounded in respect for research participants remained paramount throughout the research process (Squire et al 2017).

Limitations to participation reflect relations of privilege and the unequal positionalities of researcher and researched, which were particularly stark during research for *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*. A core aim of the project was to expose and subvert these relations by engaging people on the move in precarious conditions as experts in assessing the impact of the European policy agenda. The value of this approach is evident in Heather L. Johnson's (2016) discussion of the role of narrative research in migration studies. Johnson engages in an important move by addressing people on the move directly as "autonomous and creative subjects" (Ibid, 383), who produce meaning in terms that render them not simply as research informants but as *authors* in their own right. The significance of this move, she claims, is that it moves away from "the division between elite and marginalized, the powerful who frame and sustain the dominant narrative, and the subaltern, who are silenced within it" (Ibid, 384). This is also something that our research participants highlighted as important. For example, one person we interviewed in Malta told us:

We can contribute and that would be a better solution. I think. Because we are experts in our life. Nobody is more expert than us. I lived it for 9 years, and somebody come in Europe and sit in Norwegian parliament and says that he knows better than me about migration... I don't think so. I don't think so."

(Ethiopian man, Malta)

It is by "centring" the voice of people on the move in the way that this Ethiopian man and Johnson suggests is critical that *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* has sought to "authorise" the voices of people on the move (Johnson 2016, 389). Indeed, rather than *extracting* knowledge from research participants, the project from the start to aimed to assess policy developments *with* research participants through the collaborative formation of knowledge. In so doing, the research itself challenges the conventions that render people on the move as "unauthorised speakers" in policy and wider political debates (Ibid).

One way in which the project did this was through sharing directly the aims of the research with participants, and asking questions explicitly about what messages they want to pass on to policy-makers about their situation, having made – or contemplated making - the precarious journey across the Mediterranean Sea to the EU. Responses to this question were mixed, with some unable or unwilling to answer the question and with others providing detailed answers that often challenged the terms of policy-making debates significantly. One notable point arising here is that many rejected a positionality of passivity and provided alternative suggestions for policy development. A consideration of some of the statements arising from our interviews in Istanbul highlights this nicely. In the first statement, a Syrian man's request to policy-makers rejects any suggestion of the need for charity, but instead calls for the opportunity to work and live a life in which he can sustain his needs and that of his family:

I don't need financial help, money. I need a place to work, so I can earn money and live with my family. That's all I want from this world. I don't want to become rich, a

billionaire, nor do I want to die of hunger. I want to have a full life. If my son asks for a cookie I can get it for him.

(Syrian man, Istanbul)

That this man rejects charity points to the limitations of a charitable humanitarian approach in contributing to the positive transformation of migration politics, and attests to the importance of an approach that takes the claims and demands of people on the move seriously.

Some of our research participants went further than making personal demands to policy-makers, by contributing suggestions for policy development much more directly. For example, in highlighting the limits of deterrent EU policies another Syrian man told us:

Europe should be smarter. Accept that people enter legally but make people pay processing fees. This is a way for Europe to make money and have more security. Any refugee would pay 500 dollars for this! But the ways things are now, Europe has to be clear that if anyone enters illegally that they won't be accepted. This is what they were trying to do with the EU-Turkey deal but it won't work.

(Syrian man, Istanbul)

By engaging research participants as people with the authority to speak, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* highlights claims that are otherwise discounted as “unauthorised” and draws out narratives and testimonies that challenge policies which leave people on the move to face death and vulnerability. This involves *bearing witness* to the violence of contemporary migration and border policy and practices. It is this emphasis on bearing witness that the article now turns, by exploring how research that draws out the authority of “unauthorised voices” is developed in *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* through dissemination strategies that facilitate the formation of constructive connections between diverse constituencies. More than simply providing a way of reframing policy through qualitative research that takes the claims and demands of people on the move seriously, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* thus also fosters positive relations between ‘new arrivals’ and ‘receiving communities’ as an alternative to those embedded in fear and insecurity.

Bearing witness and the challenge of empathy

Qualitative participatory approaches to research have a long history of asking “who has been excluded” and in reflecting on how research can contribute to positive social and political transformations through “bearing witness” to injustice (Fine 2006). This is particularly important in the context of precarious migrations, whereby the numbers of people dying *en route* have increased dramatically since 2014 (IOM 2017). A key dimension of the *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* project has been to bear witness to the violence of contemporary policies through sharing the stories or testimonies of people on the move with audiences from ‘receiving communities’. As well as producing a detailed report for policy makers (Squire et al 2017), the project – like others – has involved various workshops and policy events for academics, policy makers and practitioners, and it has produced a range of more accessible online articles for non-expert audiences (e.g. Squire 2017b,c,d). Going further, it has also created an on-line interactive map that documents the journeys and stories of research

participants, to share with students and wider publics.⁵ By collaborating with artists in the dissemination of this story map (Squire 2017e, O'Donoghue with Squire 2017), the project has sought to engage audiences in terms that facilitate the building of constructive connections between diverse constituencies – not only through fostering a deepened appreciation of migratory journeys and experiences on the part of ‘receiving communities’, but also through fostering a deepened appreciation of the claims and demands that people on the move make on the basis of these.

The *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* interactive story map documents individual journeys visually while embedding fragments of the stories that research participants shared along different points of the journey. Image 1 presents a screenshot of the journeys and story titles for a selection of interviews in Rome. On entering this site through the map, audiences can click on an individual journey – be that of a brother escaping civil war, three female friends escaping sexual violence, a mother of six escaping rejection by her parents-in-law, and so on. Once within a particular story, the reader is guided through a summary of the journey and is then told about the various challenges along the way as these are narrated by the research participant in focus. A reflective question follows each individual quote, to prompt consideration on the part of the reader about how they would respond if they found themselves in a similar situation. These elements all represent a strategy of translating the research encounter into the possibility for a reflexive engagement on the part of ‘receiving communities’, many of whom don’t directly encounter people on the move in precarious situations but can nevertheless share their stories indirectly through the map.

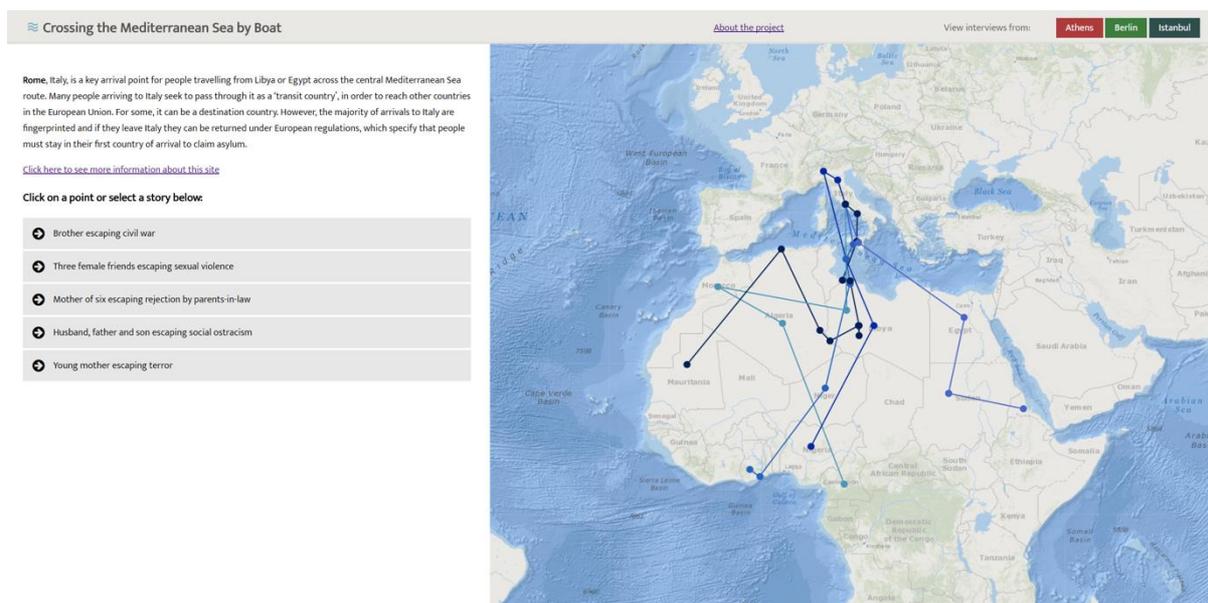


Image 1: Visual Story Map: Rome

Documenting conditions that are overlooked in political and public debates, identifying people on the move in terms of their relationships to others (as brothers, sisters, friends etc.), and embedding within the story map a series of questions to prompt reflection, all reflect an effort on the part of the project to facilitate the formation of constructive connections between diverse constituencies. Yet this raises a question as to whether or not a dissemination tool such as the interactive map can effectively forge empathy as a ground for the positive transformation of the politics of migration. Carolyn Pedwell (2014) reflects on the challenge of empathy, which she describes as a fraught process that does not enable the desired comfort and satisfaction that

comes from the accurate understanding and emotional equivalence associated with fully knowing the experience of another. Pedwell cautions against an uncritical adoption of the neoliberal framing of empathy, which requires the privileged to ‘step into the shoes’ of the marginalised to understand their suffering, while simply maintaining existing power dynamics. Instead, she points to the importance of opening up the ambivalences of empathy, approaching it as a “complex and ongoing set of translational processes involving conflict, negotiation and attunement” (2016).

Pedwell’s notion of empathy as a confrontational process of translation is one that is reflected in the discomfort that can emerge in the encounter between researcher and research participant.⁶ Rather than giving up on uncomfortable and unsatisfying exchanges due to the difficulties arising, Pedwell (2014, 2016) suggests that *giving in* to empathy as an imperfect encounter effectively deepens our affective and political appreciation of the power dynamics that both bind and open up divergent lives to one another. *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*’s translation of this into the story map reflects an attempt to foster what Megan Boler (1999) refers to as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ over a form a ‘passive empathy’, the latter of which overlooks relations of power and privilege while belying the difficult emotions that (failed) attempts at empathy involve. Embracing discomfort is important in this regard, because it enables appreciation of the “affective obstacles that prevent the reader’s acute attention to the power relations guiding her response and judgements”, and thus brings to bear a call to action on the part of the reader (1999, 167). This is reflected in project *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* is in terms of the development of an approach characterised by an effort to *share* the stories of research participants. This contrasts with an approaches that *takes* stories to interpret for the purposes of a pre-designed analytical framework (see also Squire 2017f). Such an approach involves acknowledgement of power dynamics integral to the research process and wider relations and histories of injustice within which these are embedded. It also demands from the research an effective response to claims made, while countering the oversight of disclosures that can provoke discomfort on the part of the listener.

It is in terms of this consideration of the claims and demands that research participants make in the context of interviews whereby *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* not only differs from quantitative research that operates in terms that objectify people on the move, but also from qualitative research that simply seeks to re-humanise people through telling their stories. On the one hand, people that we spoke to highlight the importance of a re-humanisation of people on the move. For example, one woman from Syria who we interviewed in Kos connects the recognition of the voices of people on the move to being recognised as human:

...what we want is our voice to be heard in the world. Now you will see, they are handing out food... The Syrians are not hungry. What the Syrians want is to get to [a] country that is safe and their children can go to school. This is what they want... We just want our voice to be heard in the world. We want safety. And we want them to treat people like they are humans and not animals.

(Syrian woman, Kos)

Associated with this claim to being human is the claiming of rights, which is an aspect that comes up in many of the interviews:

I believe most of the people would not come through this journey. If there are more job opportunities, more better life in Gambia, nobody would sacrifice his

life to come to Libya. Yeah. I think this is what I would have comment. It's education!"

(Gambian man, Sicily)

The effort toward re-humanisation from the perspective of people on the move is important in this regard. However, re-humanisation is understood here in terms that do not simply point to people on the move as 'human too', enabling a form of passive empathy based on an emotional equivalence without action or appreciation of power dynamics. Going further, the stories that research participants share raise demands that pose a challenge both to policy makers and to wider audiences from 'receiving communities':

What would I request? Open the border. Open a route for people, just as people who have money are able to pay for smuggling. There are a lot of people who need to go. They need to get medical treatment, they need safety, they need housing. Open a route for these people.

(Syrian woman, Athens)

Significantly, the demand for rights often involves an emphasis on their lack of provision within the EU, which points to the ways in which current policies are implicated in a form of violence that prevents people from accessing their rights:

Where are human rights? Europeans are the first to say that human rights are above everything else. So where are they?

(Syrian woman, Athens)

More than ten times I told in Sozial [Office for Health and Social Affairs in Berlin] here that if you listen... people have their own experiences. Someone has experience on engine, car engine, some people are in producing shoes. Some people are producing carpets, some people farmers... a mechanic, like a doctor, or pharmacist. People have their different experiences. So they should treat it as like bring them facilities, provide - by providing these facilities so the people can just... they can get busy, they can also educate their childs, their childrens... Otherwise here we face the same... the same problems, no education, no shelter, no facilities – so what's the difference between here and there?

(Afghan man, Berlin)

Europe – they say that human right is human right. But when we arrive here we see nothing [of] human rights... After all these risks of desert and the sea, they saved us from the death but they put us different death, they saved us from the sea but they are putting us in hunger and despair. So you saved our life, try to listen us, try help us change our life. Don't save us from death and put us in misery.

(Sudanese man, Rome)

The claims that the research participants of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* bring to bear here do more than simply demand the re-humanisation of people on the move. They highlight the limitations of *The European Agenda on Migration* and its claim to “protect those

in need” (European Commission 2015, 2), documenting the violence of contemporary policies in failing to respect the rights of people on the move.

Going further, the demands of research participants also pose a challenge to diverse constituencies within the EU, by highlighting the ways in which the current politics of migration intersect with longer histories and wider relations of inequality that involve ‘receiving communities’ as much as they involve people on the move. This is posed in some cases directly to political leaders. For example, one woman from Syria claims that EU states play a key role in creating conditions under which people are driven to migrate. She says:

Who is responsible? It is the politics of the powerful countries. They are responsible. They are capable of stopping the bloodshed [in Syria]. Greed and politics are making us ignorant. We are dying in the sea. We are dying under the bombs. We are dying at the border, they are killing us at the border. The powerful countries are watching us. They are silent. International silence.

(Syrian woman, Istanbul)

Others point to longer histories of colonialism as creating conditions that render life untenable in countries of origin. For example, a man from the Comoros Islands claims:

France colonised us. We are free, but we are not free. We are free, but France is still there. He go[es] everywhere, to take everything. And then everybody want to go to France. France takes, but does not make. He takes boats, planes, fish... he take[s] everything.

(Man from the Comoros Islands, Malta)

The legacies of colonial histories – and from a (neo)colonial present – are here emphasised as important in understanding contemporary migrations, and as reflecting inequalities that compromise the freedom of those who are migrate under precarious conditions. Similarly, a woman from Nigeria challenges contemporary inequalities of global migration and the differences between migrations from the global North to the global South:

White people normally go to Nigeria, they are safe, they are ok. I know that very well... God created everybody... So it is the same. Everybody is free. You are free to go to Nigeria, there is your choice. So your push allows us enter Italy freely without no problem, that is what we want.

(Nigerian woman, Rome)

These claims certainly do not enable any simple form of equivalence of feeling, and indeed they may cause significant discomfort to audiences looking to engage a form of passive empathy. Critically, they demand what Megan Boler (1999) refers to as a “testimonial reading” that can engage stories shared as acts of witness, rather than as acts of spectating. Boler suggests that in a “testimonial reading, the reader recognises herself as a ‘battleground for forces raging...to which [she] must pay attention...to properly carry out [her] task’” (Boler citing Laub 1999, 167). Demanding what Boler calls a “historicized ethics”, the stories shared within the interactive map reflect the significance of diverging positionalities, and pose a

challenge to audiences in ‘receiving communities’ to take collective responsibility for the violence experienced by people on the move in precarious conditions. This involves appreciation of the limitations of (passive, neoliberal) empathy while engaging in its challenges through a process of *bearing witness* to injustice and violence. In this regard, the mapping project resonates with artistic interventions that seek to foster social and political change.

Affecting change through art

Disseminating the stories shared as part of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* in terms that invite audiences to bear witness to the violence of contemporary policy has been critical to the project’s overall aim of affecting positive transformation in the field of migration politics. This is not to suggest that such a dissemination strategy can provide a quick and easy fix to such violence, nor can it in any straightforward way provide an alternative policy frame to that of the *European Agenda*. However, it is to say that such an approach has potential in affecting change over a longer duration, through promoting a broader shift of consciousness that invokes appreciation of the importance of taking collective action in response to the claims and demands raised by people on the move in precarious conditions. This emphasis on shifting consciousness is one that also penetrates critical art work, which seeks to “‘move’ us – aesthetically, emotionally and sometimes even physically” (Harrebye 2016, 194). In their edited collection, *Art as Political Witness*, Kia Lindroos and Frank Möller emphasise that art can function as “a spectator or auditor” of politics (2017, 33). Going further, they indicate that art is political in the sense that “it can shape our vision of life or (what we regard as) reality... by ...inviting audience engagement with conditions referenced in a given work of art” (2017, 51). This is a strategy that also characterises the installation *Dead Reckoning*, which is an art project that *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* worked alongside in 2017 as part of a larger collaboration between researchers and artists at London’s Tate Modern Switch House.⁷

Dead Reckoning is an art installation comprising 5083 origami boats, each of which has been created out of paper that was hand-marbled in her kitchen by the creator Bern O’Donoghue. The boats are different colours, representing different months during which deaths occurred. Every boat is marked with a relationship such as “mother” “son” “neighbor” and “friend”, representing a life documented as lost in the Mediterranean Sea. O’Donoghue’s aim in marking each boat with a relationship is to forge connections between people visiting the installation and those who have died anonymously in the face of violent policies, through highlighting their shared humanity. O’Donoghue works in collaboration with audiences in order to lay out the installation (see image 2). This enables people to come together to reflect on and have dialogue about how to transform a situation that is characterised by increasing numbers of deaths at sea. More than simply inviting her audience to recognise the humanity of people on the move, however, O’Donoghue seeks to prompt those engaging with the installation to take action to change the situation through providing resources with further information about migration alongside examples of different actions that the audience can engage with. In this respect, *Dead Reckoning* contributes to a process of reframing precarious migrations in terms that promotes collective responsibility for violent policies associated with death and vulnerability across the Mediterranean Sea.



Image 2: *Dead Reckoning* and *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*, March 2017

Lindroos and Möller highlight how bearing witness in a traditional sense entails an act of being present by those giving testimony, as well as an act of faith on the part of those judging whether or not to believe the witness in question (2017: 33). However, when understood more fundamentally as a *political act*, they suggest that art can be understood as operating across aesthetic and affective registers to engage audiences directly as witnesses of contemporary conditions – in this case the violence of contemporary migration policies. By integrating the project's interactive map with the *Dead Reckoning* installation, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* has broadened the audiences that it involves and the strategies that it employs in bearing witness to such violence. The collaboration with an artistic intervention thus enables the opportunity to reach further and deeper in affecting positive change through facilitating the formation of constructive connections between people on the move and 'receiving communities'. As Jill Bennett (2016) argues, the fostering of 'empathic vision' through art can forge connections between people at a distance, in terms that can bridge the gap between diverging experiences. Moreover, as Elisabeth Grosz (2008) suggests, the significance of art lies in its ability to enable a re-framing of issues through the production of new feelings and sensations. In other words, collaboration with *Dead Reckoning* has enabled *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* additional opportunities to contribute to positive transformation in the field of migration politics over a slower duration, through affecting a change in *affective consciousness* in terms that can potentially bring people together in new ways.

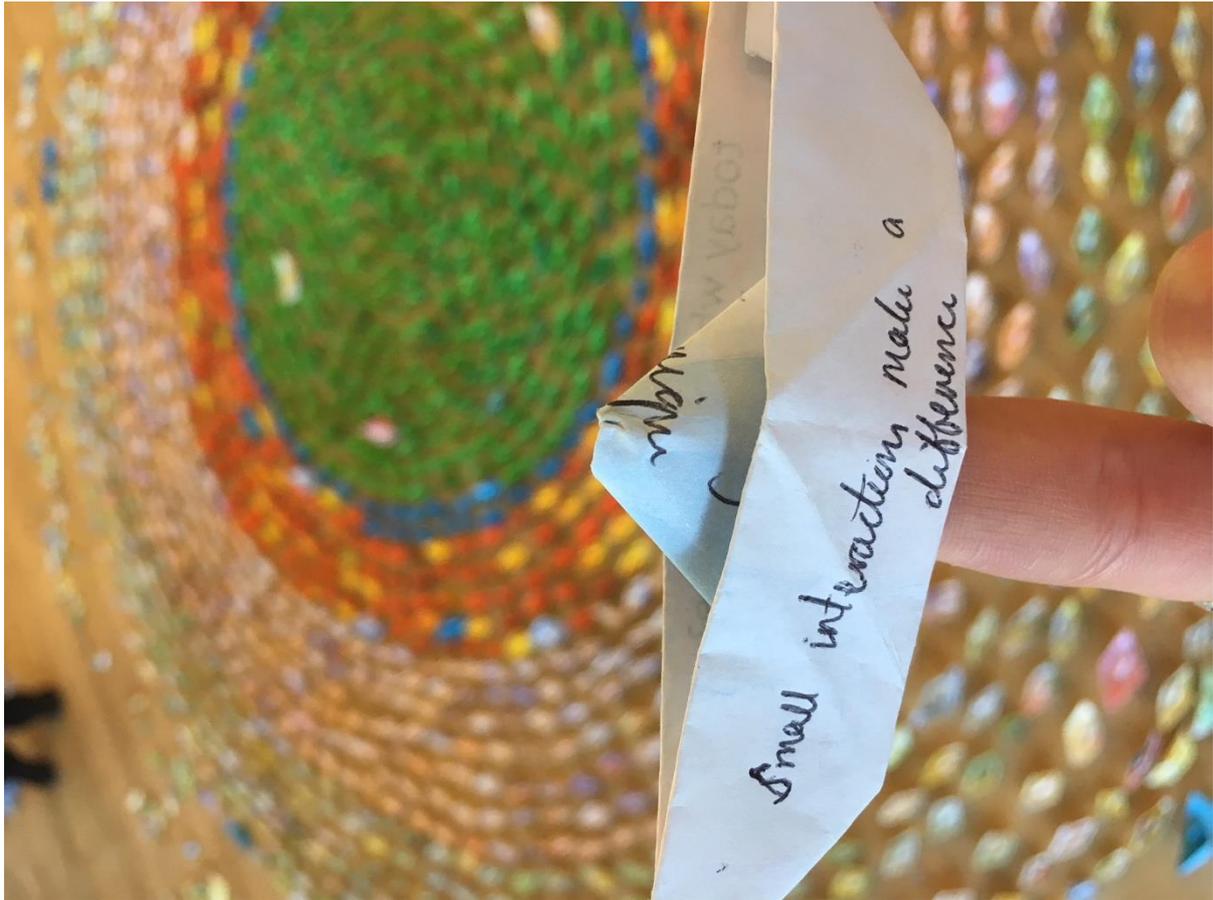


Image 3: Reflecting on *Dead Reckoning* and *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*, March 2017

The coming together of art and research in this sense can be interpreted as facilitating the formation of constructive connections between diverse constituencies, or as creating the conditions for ‘mobile solidarities’ to emerge (Squire 2011), whereby these are often prevented by the silencing of people on the move and the distance created between ‘receiving communities’ and those making the journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat. By bringing *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*’s emphasis on story sharing and interactive mapping together with *Dead Reckoning*’s aesthetic and affective reframing of conditions that are often left unquestioned, practices of bearing witness to the contemporary violence of migration policies in this regard can provoke a level discomfort that points to the limits of passive empathy. While some of the audience at Tate was familiar with the experiences of death and vulnerability that people on the move experience, others were not and expressed the need for action in light of what they had read and experienced (see Image 3). Feedback on the interactive map by readers of the stories shared are telling here. People sometimes share their shock at reading how difficult the journeys can be, and at how different their understanding is on the basis of the stories shared in comparison to their understanding via the mass media. Indeed, this reflects an approach that does more than simply contributing to the re-humanisation of people on the move through a deepened appreciation of their journeys and experiences: it also reflects an appreciation of the claims and demands that are made on the basis of these. Critically, it highlights the importance of going beyond a form of passive empathy in working toward positive transformation in the field of migration politics.

Conclusion

How can research contribute to the positive transformation of the politics of migration, in order that death and vulnerability no longer dominate the experiences of people on the move? In an effort to address such a question, this article has examined the qualitative methodology and dissemination strategy of the project *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*, which has undertaken in-depth qualitative interviews with over 250 people who have undertaken – or contemplated undertaking – the precarious journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat. The article has argued that the approach developed in *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* is distinctive, because it facilitates engagement with research participants as people with the authority to speak about migratory dynamics and policy effects, which represents a challenge to the unequal relations on which contemporary policies rest. The importance of this is reflected in the dissemination strategy of story sharing through interactive mapping, which involves appreciation of the claims and demands that are made on the basis of precarious journeys and experiences through a practice of bearing witness that invites collective responsibility for the production of death and vulnerability. This, the article has argued, contributes to the creation of conditions for positive change by grounding the connections between diverse constituencies in relations of equality and respect and by provoking a discomfort that can prompt action on the part of ‘receiving communities’. Showing how this can facilitate the formation of constructive connections between people on the move and ‘receiving communities’, the article has reflected on the ways in which collaboration between art and research can foster change of a slower duration through this strategy of bearing witness to the violence of contemporary migration policies.⁸

Nevertheless, that positive transformation of the kind envisaged here is necessarily the outcome of the methodological approach and dissemination strategy of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* is far from given, and the ambiguous effects – including the potential hostility – provoked by taking seriously the claims and demands of people on the move is an on-going challenge. Indeed, in light of the discomfort advocated as important by this article in promoting action toward positive transformation in the field of migration politics, it is perhaps critical to end on an uncomfortable note. Certainly, as scholars in the field have argued, a securitised response to migration remains prevalent (New Keywords Collective 2016). For too long, migration politics have been driven by a reactive politics of fear and insecurity (Huysmans, 2006), punctuated only by a politics of care that is fleeting and dependent on the innocence of the victim (Malkki 1996; Nyers 2006; Ticktin 2016). As Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) has emphasised, the passive spectatorship of victimhood is only punctuated by the occasional giving of aid or occasional sympathy (see also Johnson 2011). In this regard, charitable responses are not an effective alternative to a politics of fear and securitisation, which so often dominates the framing of migration as involving people who are not authorised to speak, let alone travel across the Mediterranean Sea by boat to Europe.

Indeed, charity is not accepted as such by many people on the move, as the testimonies of people on the move documented here suggest. In this context, research grounded in relations of equality and respect that seek strategies for affecting positive transformation of a slower duration may be less ineffective than they appear on the surface. Nevertheless, the aim of this article is not to suggest that researchers can be content with transformations of a slower duration – it is simply to suggest that such changes are important. The limitations of slow changes for people facing death and vulnerability today is not something that is lost on people on the move that we spoke to, however. As one of our research participants asks:

Those who are doing the research, what they can be help to us? Or what they can think that we can do together to change our situation to better?

(Man from Ivory Coast, Malta)

Research that goes beyond a form of passive empathy and works toward positive transformation of a slower duration is, in other words, important yet not adequate in the struggle toward a positive transformation of the politics of migration, in which death and vulnerability dominate. Resting content with a qualitative research methodology and dissemination strategy in this respect is not the aim of this article: rather, the aim is to contribute to a debate about how to affect positive change in the framing of contemporary policies as well as in the constituencies that such policies serve. Such a task is pressing, complicated and challenging, yet it is one that research seeking to respond to the claims and demands of people on the move is compelled to embark upon.

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² For example, Paolo Naso's work on 'humanitarian corridors' from Jordan to Italy (see Squire 2016). This is paralleled in the US context by the involvement of scholars such as Michael Clemens in initiatives such as the setting up Haitian seasonal work programmes to the US with the aim of supporting development in Haiti.

³ Indeed, increasing pressure on qualitative researchers to justify the quality of their research has also cast doubt on such research within the wider scholarly community, particularly in the US journal industry.

⁴ Research for the project was carried out in two phases. The first phase was completed during September-November 2015 and involved 136 interviews with a total of 139 participants at three island arrival sites: Kos, Malta and Sicily. Difficulties in recruiting research participants in Malta due to reduced arrivals resulting from an 'agreement' with Italy during the time-period of our research led to some of the interviews being carried out at this site between December 2015 and March 2016. The second phase was completed during May-July 2016 and involved 121 interviews with a total of 132 participants at four urban sites: Athens, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome.

⁵ See warwick.ac.uk/crossing-the-med-map

⁶ Particular credit needs to be paid to researchers of *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* here, who carried out significant numbers of interviews in a short period of time, continuing in the face of discomfort to make efforts to provide the most supportive context possible for each person participating in the project.

⁷ *Who are we?* was a week of participatory installations, conversations and learning labs curated by Tate Exchange Associates: Counterpoints Arts, The Open University, University of Warwick and Loughborough University from 14-19 March 2017.

See <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/tate-exchange/workshop/who-are-we>

⁸ While the article points to the importance and potential of qualitative participatory approaches based on an initial engagement with the project tools and feedback received on these to date, clearly the slower duration and unconventional effects of such interventions need further assessing over time.