AGENCER SAMIRA : COMPRENDRE L'HUMANITARISME SEXUEL À TRAVERS LA RÉALISATION D'UN FILM

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I.
Crossing Sexual Humanitarian Borders

1   "You think that, because you are French!" - Samira told me (slightly) angrily when I said as a half joke that I did not see a real man in front of me. She was wearing a frock and full make-up, but claimed to be a real man like her father. And she was selling sex to

other men *'en travesti'* that night, as most nights, in Marseille. "I know that you are Italian, but you are like the French… Your parents know that you are queer, right?" she replied quickly to my objection that I was not French, but Italian. "Yes, but it took a while, you know? With my mother it was easier, but with my father it took almost 30 years…" I replied. We were both standing against the wall on the corner where he usually sold sex, chatting. "Whatever!" Samira objected "I am not like that. I am a real Algerian man, just like my father. In my family, a man is a man; a woman is a woman. When I am Karim, I go with women, when I am Samira, I go with men. You will never see me go with a man when I am Karim! I am not like those whores over there, you know?".

By then, I had already decided that Samira was going to be the protagonist of the first ethnofiction of *Emborders,* an art-science project on the effectiveness and scope of humanitarian initiatives targeting migrant sex workers and sexual minority asylum seekers. To have their rights recognised and avoid deportation, migrants assemble their bodies and perform their subjectivity according to standardized humanitarian scripts of victimhood, vulnerability and gender/sex that act as 'biographical borders' (Mai 2014) between deportation and access to social support, legal documentation and work.

Emborders combines ethnographic observations and filmmaking in order to analyze and represent the forms of subjectivation and agency produced by humanitarian biographical borders.

The convergence between the intensification and the diversification of globalized migrant flows, the implementation of restrictive migration policies and the onset of humanitarian forms of governance has invested social protection of vulnerable migrant groups with new functions of control (Fassin, 2011). Western discourses of sexual liberation have become "avatars of both freedom and modernity" (Butler, 2008). They feed into wider Orientalist narratives that are complicit with the emergence of new 'homonationalist' hierarchies of civilization (Puar, 2007) and globalized regimes of neoliberal governmentality: "sexual democracy" (Fassin, 2010). In the process, 'undesirable' migrant and ethnic minority groups are targeted by gender and sexuality-related moral panics and by associated humanitarian interventions.

Moral panics about the extent of trafficking in the global sex industry and the number of bogus 'gay' asylum seekers amplify the magnitude of these issues. They also reflect real policy-making and moral issues and highlight the emergence of alarm-generated forms of bordering and affective governance. Countries in the global north celebrate the acceptance of sexual diversity, while the fight against trafficking in the sex industry is an essential feature of their asserted democratic superiority to the rest of the world. However, their asylum system fails to recognize that people feel persecuted not only by economic inequalities, but also by socio-political circumstances. In turn, anti-trafficking initiatives tend not to recognize that, by working in the sex industry, many migrants counter the increased vulnerability and exploitability they meet in their working lives.

Support for victims of trafficking is dependent on the imposition of a standardized victimhood story about their ambivalent understandings of agency and exploitation. Sexual minority asylum seekers are seldom granted protection because their sexual liminalities do not match the canons of 'homosexuality' in the global north. By migrating, people negotiate their ambivalent aspirations to globalized cosmopolitan lifestyles as a way of avoiding the prevalence of hardship and conservative gender and sexual mores at home. Sexual and gender-based social alarms fail to recognize this complexity. They legitimize restrictive migration policies and 'sexual humanitarian' social interventions and thus exacerbate the vulnerability of the populations they aim to rescue through the criminalization and deportation processes they enforce.

2 To understand the specific interplay between protection and control as experienced by migrants and how they are problematized as vulnerable by humanitarian interventions and discourses in terms of their sexual orientation and behaviour, I introduce the concept of 'sexual humanitarianism'. This notion goes further in developing existing analyses of the manner in which fixed notions of suffering become the basis for granting of the right to asylum and humanitarian protection and operate as mechanisms for controlling migration (e.g. Ticktin, 2012). By highlighting the sexual salience of humanitarian migration control, sexual humanitarianism focuses specifically on the ways in which local, national and international humanitarian institutions and NGOs strategically problematize, support and intervene with groups of migrants, on the basis of aspects of vulnerability that are supposedly associated with their sexual orientation and behaviour (Mai, 2014).

Samira's story reveals the ways in which humanitarian biographical borders are embodied and understood by migrants in relation to their unfolding and transforming lives. Karim, the Algerian male refugee performing Samira at night, was an ideal research subject for the *Emborders* art-science research project. He belonged to two main categories of migrants targeted by sexual humanitarianism: sex workers and sexual minority refugees. I was first introduced to him by people working for a harm reduction project supporting sex workers in Marseille. When I met him on the doorstep of his flat in the sex work district in central Marseille in June 2012, Karim was selling sex as Samira. He was almost 40 years old.

During the many ethnographic moments that I had the chance to share with him in the two years that followed, he told me his incredible story of biographical, humanitarian and geographical border crossing. His experience embodies the many different ways in which sexuality, gender, class and ethnicity intersect within people's identities and subjectivities and the forms of geographical and social mobility they can access.

II.
An Intimate Autoethnography
of Humanitarian Borders

3 Researching the forms of agency produced by sexual humanitarianism means eliciting the 'sexual stories' framing the experiences and subjectivity of migrants that emerge from the wider social and historical settings they intersect by migrating (Plummer, 1995). As humanitarian scripts and images saturate the epistemological field of representation and understandings in the contemporary social world (Agier, 2010), contemporary migrant sexual stories are structured according to specific narratives of identification, suffering and

abuse. In the process, the complexity of people's migration trajectories and life histories is reduced and simplified in both public debates and people's selfrepresentations[1]. For instance, the intricate relationship between sex work and migration is often subsumed under the all-encompassing and increasingly governmental term of trafficking. In parallel, the intrinsically polymorphous nature of sexual orientations and behaviour is obfuscated by teleological 'coming out' stories and LGBT sexual taxonomies that originate in the global north. It is in the context of this globalized humanitarian system that specific sexual stories become biographical borders preventing and allowing people to access rights, work and mobility.

The comparison between the socially available scripts and repertoires emerging during biographical interviews and the way these 'official' narratives and selfrepresentations are embodied in everyday life is a key aspect of my methodological approach. Ethnography often enables me to identify and analyze strategic contradictions between the fluid lifestyles and livelihoods of research subjects and the more socially sanctioned selfrepresentations emerging from formal interviews. It is by capturing these clashes and contradictions that I can best understand the complexity of migrants' sexual identifications and their understandings and experiences of vulnerability and agency. In many cases, I use my 'erotic subjectivity' as a strategic instrument of research (Kulick and Wilson, 1995) to both elicit and queer hegemonic sex-gendered selfrepresentations. For instance, I sometimes proactively disclose my homosexuality in order to offer a safe space for research subjects who might feel threatened by homophobia and the whore stigma (Pheterson, 1993). Less often, and whenever the intersubjective circumstances are appropriate, I challenge, mostly through humour or flirting, male and female research subjects whose stories, subjectivity and orientation are less 'straight' than those they present to me.

He used to say: "you're the shame of the family and it has to be cleaned by blood".

4   As my subjectivity is a central methodological tool within my research on the nexus between migration and the global sex industry, I increasingly write up my research findings as an autoethnography. This is a research approach that systematically explores the personal experience of the researcher in order to analyze wider social, cultural and political interpretations (Ellis *et al*., 2010). Autoethnography has become a relatively common genre of ethnographic writing in a number of disciplines. Different ethnographic approaches have been characterized by, and classified according to, different relationships between the 'auto' personal dimension of the writer and the 'ethnographic' social and cultural dynamics involved. In my work, I refer to the concept of 'analytical autoethnography' as a genre of autoethnographic writing that aims to connect self-reflexivity and the "narrative visibility of the researcher's self" to the "dialogue with informants beyond the self" and the "commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, 2006: 378). At the same time, I define my autoethnographic approach as intimate in two main respects: firstly, because it draws on personal and intersubjective psychodynamic processes as key heuristic and hermeneutic tools; secondly, and because it focuses on sexual practices, migration-related stigmatizing

factors (i.e. the lack of legal migration status or the impossibility of returning home as an achieving migrant) and affects that are generally embedded in the private dimension of people's lives.

While listening and talking to Samira, I was fascinated by the way in which her story both resonated with, and dissonated from, humanitarian biographical borders. Karim left Algeria as a young man after his breasts started developing. This was the result of taking hormones that he obtained from the transsexual sex workers whom he met while wandering in his city of origin. They were the only reference available to him for making sense of his sex-gendered 'difference'. Karim then decided to leave Algeria for Italy where he started selling sex with fellow-Algerian transsexuals in Naples. Samira describes those years as liberating, empowering and glamorous. "I was not like now, you know? Italian men were crazy about me, you should have seen the clients I had, the clothes I wore…"

Sexual Humanitarianism: the humanitarian protection of migrants in relation to their sexual orientation and behaviour is implicated in the enforcement of biographical borders.

As his life moved on, Karim wanted to start saving money and "make something of his life". He moved to France where he learnt that there were better possibilities of being regularized as a refugee by seeking asylum as an 'Algerian transsexual', a category officially recognized as a 'social group' deserving asylum in France under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Ten years later, Karim was granted asylum in France as Samira "thanks to his breasts" which, in his opinion, allowed him to be believed when he claimed asylum application as a transsexual facing persecution and death if deported back to Algeria. During these interviews, Karim described his life in terms of the Algerian transsexual biographical border: a teleological 'transnormative' narrative originating from the global north that allowed him to frame his complex sexual and gender identification as "a woman trapped in the wrong body" (Stone, 1992).

Re-enacting ethnographic irony while shooting Samira.

Getting Closer to Algeria

5 After he obtained his French refugee passport, Karim continued to sell sex and live in France, first in Paris and then in Marseille, where he moved in order to be "closer to Algeria". This move was the beginning of his gradual reorientation towards Algerianness and heteronormativity which continued for twenty years. When his father was dying in a French hospital, which would make him the head of the family, Karim had his breasts surgically removed and went to see his father who reinstated him as his son. Later he married a woman in order to obtain a regular (i.e. non-refugee) French passport that would allow him to return to Algeria and assume his new role of male head of the family. When I met him, he was back selling sex in central Marseille as Samira with the aid of fake breasts. "It's much better like this", he told me one night. "I can put them on and take them off when I want. If I wore them during the day, people would spit at me".

Listening to Samira's sexual stories, I was often reminded of the ways in which ethnic identities, class relations, gendered roles and sexual practices are assembled into people's sense of self with regard to their feelings and experiences of belonging to national moral communities (Lambewski, 1999). For instance, the claim of being "only active" in sexual encounters with clients is a very strategic discourse that positions the official selfrepresentation of Albanian and Romanian sex workers as belonging to their national and moral communities as opposed to the passivity and immorality of their Italian 'queer' clients (Mai, 2004). In the same way, Samira seems to associate her Algerianness – "I am a real man like my father" – with heterosexual (and heterosexist!) sexual and gender demarcation. Her motto, "I sleep with men when I am Samira and with women when I am Karim", differentiates her from "those queers and whores over there", and is in direct contradiction with the Algerian transsexual biographical border she mobilized when she applied for asylum, according to which she was a "woman trapped in a man's body".

I can walk in the city without being bothered.

00:59   ▶   IIIII **HD** *vimeo*

III.
Mobile Orientations

While listening to the unfolding of Samira's life between different and evolving sexual stories, biographical borders, priorities and opportunities, I was reminded of Stuart Hall's anti-essentialist definition of identity as 'strategic and positional' (Hall, 1996: 3). This means that identity and related forms of subjectivity do not exist *per se* in a unified and coherent form. Rather, they are continually re-constructed over time and performed in social interaction according to the contingent needs and priorities of individuals and groups. A performative and relational understanding of subjectification is predicated on the recognition of the intrinsic, if not ontological, heterogeneity of subjectivity. In my work, I use the concept of selfrepresentation to describe the forms of identity, subjectivity and of consciousness emerging from the constant interaction and dialogue between the subject and the material and narrative worlds it inhabits. My conceptualization of selfrepresentations subsumes and transcends the difference between social and subjective representation, because discourses framing particular models of personhood also frame the way the surrounding social world is understood and experienced. Selfrepresentation and identity result from the complex interplay between hegemonic representations and their subjective internalization or rejection.

While talking with Samira, I also reflected on the dynamic and contextual nature of agency. I was reminded how the capacity for action emerges out of specific and always contradictory regimes and technologies of subjectification. In other words, agency is surely a force and, as such, arises from how humans are assembled historically, rather than from any essential property of the subject (Rose, 1998: 186-7). Migrants' understanding of agency and vulnerability are embedded within existential priorities and needs that evolve alongside their migration trajectories and emerge from a dynamic evaluation of "past experiences and a desire to achieve some improvement in the future" (Bastia and McGrath, 2011). Within this dynamic evaluation, what used to be a risk can sometimes become an opportunity and vice-versa as migrants decide, implicitly or explicitly, to endure different opportunities of protection, autonomy and control according to where they are in relation to their desired life trajectory.

"What are all these rumours about me being a transsexual working in the street? Can you see any breasts?" - I told him.

7   To account for the role of materiality, sexuality and contingency in the emergence of the subjectivities and agencies of migrants, I draw on Phillips' reappraisal of Deleuze and Guattari's original notion of *agencement*. Following Phillips, I translate *agencement* as 'agencing', rather than assemblage, in order to underscore its original reference to a heterogeneous and dynamic arrangement enabling a specific experience of becoming (Phillips, 2006). I also refer to Sara Ahmed's phenomenological notion of 'orientation' which refers to specific socio-cultural alignments of objects, narratives, bodies, and gender/sex roles that can become "the space for action of specific subjectivities" (Ahmed, 2006). In order to carry out an adequately complex analysis of migrants' experiences of agency, I have introduced (Mai, 2016) my own concept of 'mobile orientations' as a reference to how migrants inhabit a desired subjectivity by creating an alignment of agencing objects, mobilities and sexual stories. At the centre of the concept of mobile orientations is the awareness that there is no agency preceding the agencing arrangement or vice-versa. Rather, mobile orientations are heterogeneous alignments emerging socially as the agencing context for emerging migratory subjectivities.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on my theorization of migrant agency any further. Here, I would like to stress the intricate intersectional salience of sexual orientations and gender roles in the arrangement of people's mobile orientations, as well as in the agencing decisions they make. Karim experiences selling sex in Europe as enabling and liberating because it provides him with the possibility of embodying Samira. This is a version of himself that is in continuity with his selfrepresentation as 'effeminate' in Algeria, while also responding to the socio-economic consequences of his expulsion from his family. The first 'outbound' phase of his life is characterized by his desire to flee homophobia in Algeria and involves a Deleuzian 'becoming a woman', by moving abroad and applying for asylum in France as an 'Algerian transsexual'.

Mobile orientations: migrants inhabit a desired subjectivity by creating an alignment of agencing objects, mobilities and sexual stories.

At the same time, the sexual stories and gender roles framing his sense of self remain anchored to a heterosexist and heteronormative framework within which he needs to keep being "just like his father" while selling sex as Samira abroad. As Karim's life evolves and his family expects him to become its newfound male head, his mobile orientation becomes 'inbound' and veers towards 'becoming man' according to the gender roles and sexual stories available in Algeria. It was at this moment that he decided to convert his French refugee passport, which did not allow him to return to Algeria, into a regular French passport by marrying a French (lesbian) woman. His decision to migrate, sell sex abroad, apply for asylum as a transsexual woman, and return home as a heterosexual man highlight the

contextual, positional and dynamic nature of peoples' mobile orientations. Karim's trajectory reminds us powerfully that agencing decisions mean very different things at different times. It highlights how, to make sense for migrants, academic and policy-makers, agency can be viewed more as a socio-culturally situated capacity for action that allows people to inhabit and perform norms differently in the context of specific relations of subordination (Mahmood, 2005: 18).

Look at me! A real man.

00:55

HD vimeo

8   As Samira talked about her decision to leave Algeria to "be herself", my thoughts kept going back to my adolescent self and my agencing decision to 'become myself' in the UK. I was also made to feel effeminate in relation to most of my peers and colleagues. I also felt that I had to go to abroad to be myself; an agencing decision that was unquestionable for me, I just 'knew'. At an age where "being gay" was suddenly everything I thought I was, I found in British films, pop music and novels the narrative and visual scripts that made me realize that I could only be myself by going there. I remember reading Italian newspapers in search of news about the UK. I remember admiring Boy George, Jimmy Somerville, Marc Almond. The political struggles of the Thatcher years interested me; the Italian scenario bored me. I was born in the wrong country by mistake, I felt English inside. I thought that English people were more open, that they would understand me better. Most importantly, during most of my teen years I thought I could be either Italian and straight, or English and gay. In my imagination and projection of myself into the future, there was no possibility of a third space within all these aspects. At the time, the only direction I could find for orienting my emerging sense of self was the UK. I had to go and participate in a material and cultural economy that gave me the hope to being myself, whatever that meant. So I left for London, UK[2], as soon as I could.

So when Samira presented her to me, I thought about that period of my life. I had been in a similar state of mind for a very long time, but in many more ways, I had come from a different planet. I did experience homophobia, but I was never presented with the threat of being kicked out of my family and home or persecuted socially. I was respected and loved by my classmates and friends. My immediate family was supportive of my identity, with the partial exception of my father, who has ambivalently homophobic for most of my life and only came fully on board when I was 33. But I always felt that I had a place I was welcome to stay with my mother and her side of the family and, in the last instance, with my father too. In my mother's family, there was an on-going intellectual conversation about homosexuality. This focused, mainly on the towering figure of Pier Paolo Pasolini and his function as the organic intellectual within the Italian Communist Party, which was the hegemonic political allegiance in my family, city and region of origin[3]. I remember how my mother and the rest of the family cried when he was murdered, it was a mourning we all shared. So, yes, I guess in comparison to Samira and in her eyes, I was 'French' after all.

Comparing mobile orientations through ethnofictional filmmaking

IV.
Assembling Samira

Samira is a textbook case for the study of biographical borders. Her subjectivity is marked by multiplicity, vulnerability and agency as her life unfolds between the contradictory requirements of being a 'transsexual' in France and a 'man' in Algeria. How do we represent the negotiation of the different 'biographical borders' she needs to perform to be herself? How can writing give justice to the complex interpersonal, sensuous and affective transactions through which knowledge happened between us? Can ethnographic cinema better represent the complexity of her subjectivity and the multiple versions of the self she produces in different situations? How to avoid voyeurism, given the desire to show 'the real' that characterizes both documentary and fiction filmmaking? How to protect Karim's identity, given the degree of stigmatization experienced by sex workers and sexual minority refugees?

Throughout my career as a sociologist and as an ethnographer, I have felt frustrated with academic writing as a way of conveying the embodied, sensuous, affective, performative and intersubjective dimensions of knowledge production. In addition to developing autoethnographic writing, I decided to respond to this frustration by developing a participative creative and filmmaking-based methodology inspired by the principles of 'ethno-fiction' (Rouch, 2003) and 'ethno-mimesis' (O'Neill, 2011), both of which include migrants as active producers and performers of their own interpretations. The term ethno-fiction refers to Jean Rouch's attempt to capture the 'ethos' of lived research experiences by transcending "the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, participation and observation, knowledge and sentiment" (Stoller, 1992: 143).

My intention in approaching ethnographic filmmaking was to reproduce and share with viewers the intimately inter-subjective, visual, affective and sensuous texture of ethnography and qualitative interviewing in order to come closer to the complex experiences I could observe during fieldwork. This resulted in the production of my *Sex Work Trilogy* and of *Samira*, the first art-science installation resulting from *Emborders*[4]. The Trilogy includes *Comidas Rapidas – Fast Bites* (Mai 2010; 5 mins) on the relationship between 'errant' forms of mobility, migration and the involvement of Moroccan and Romanian minors and young men selling sex in Seville; *Mother Europe* (Mai 2011; 5 mins) on the relationship between tourism-related forms of sex work and migration; and *Normal* (Mai 2012; 48 mins) on the intricacy of love, exploitation, autonomy and dependency as experienced by migrants working

in a globalized sex industry.
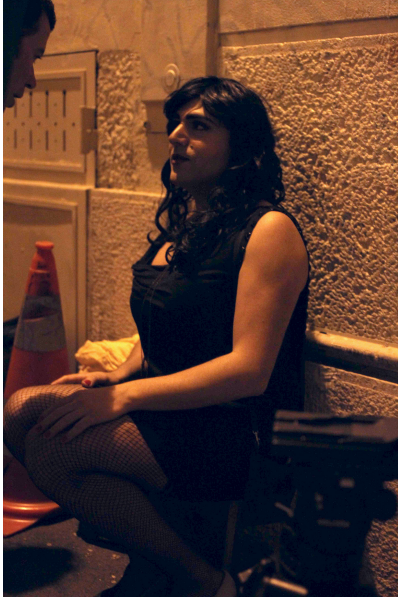
10   In the first two films of the trilogy, the 'real' research subjects presents their stories
and realities directly, even if their visibility is mediated by stylistic and filmic choices
such as filters and superimpositions that reflect their condition of marginalization and
stigmatization. Normal[5] is my first experimental ethno-fiction using actors and filming their
performance of real research interviews and situations to protect the identity of the
original subjects and to challenge the criteria of authenticity underpinning humanitarian
borders, documentary filmmaking and academic research. *Samira* (Mai 2013; 27 min) is also an
experimental ethno-fiction presenting the story of Karim on two screens as a way of
portraying how the dichotomies engendered by humanitarian biographical borders and LGBT
taxonomies from the global north are embodied and inscribed within the subjectivity of
migrants. Both *Normal* and *Samira* can be seen as pushing the traditional boundaries of
ethno-fiction by using real actors to represent real people. There is more to this decision
than the ethical necessity of protecting the identity of the 'real' research subjects. By
using actors, I want to problematize what is 'real' in ethnographic filmmaking in the light
of the processual, contextual and performative nature of any subjectivity as well as the
criteria of authenticity at work in academic, humanitarian and documentary representations
of migrant agency and vulnerability in neoliberal times. I also want to highlight and
express the regimes of visibility, experience and subjectification available to my research
subjects, who need to maintain safety and anonymity as they are still stigmatized in many
ways as sex workers, sexual minorities and irregular migrants.

My ethno-fictional work also tries to represent the way knowledge happens during ethnography and qualitative interviewing.

My ethno-fictional work also tries to represent the way knowledge happens during ethnography
and qualitative interviewing. The experience of undertaking ethnography with migrant sex
workers in terms of sexual humanitarianism evokes what Sarah Ahmed calls the "ethnography
of failure", a term referring to learning to know what we fail to know about what we study.
The way Samira selectively kept me at a bay and let me come closer during 2 years of
ethnographic observation and friendship forced me to focus on inter-subjective distancing
and discursive bordering as research situations where knowledge (still) happens. It is not
that Samira did not like seeing me, but she never let me come as close as I would have
wanted. Whereas knowledge usually happens for me through merging and connected
interpersonal relations, Samira operated on a basis of differential exclusion of me from
her life. I could only see what she wanted me to see and when she felt ready for it, which
made it a very slow process. Throughout our ethnographic friendship, she was calling the
shots as to when and what I should know about her, including the night in which she invited
me upstairs and told me the details about her plan to return to Algeria as her father's
eldest son, as the new heteronormative head of the family.

Knowledge happened particularly when different sex-gendered scripts and biographical borders collided and converged in Samira's selfrepresentations. In order to obtain papers in France, Samira had to selfrepresent herself to the French authorities according to within the 'Algerian transexual' humanitarian biographical border which sees transsexual refugees as deserving because they are "women trapped in the wrong body" and as facing persecution and abuse from their family and the wider society if they return to Algeria. During our prolonged ethnographic exchanges on the street corner where she worked, she told me repeatedly that she felt that she was a man just like her father and that she had left Algeria in order to enjoy her life and her sexuality fully. However, this did not seem to resemble the humanitarian story she told the French authorities in order to be granted asylum.

I really needed to get asylum in France.
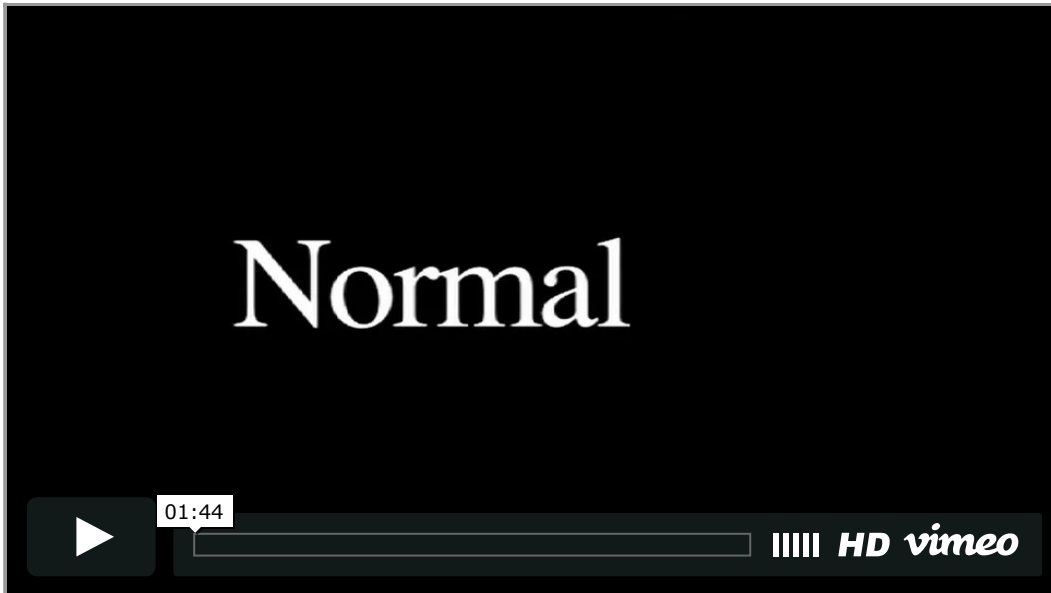
11 When she finally invited me upstairs, about one year after our first meeting, Samira finally became Karim before my eyes and showed me all the paperwork: her passport, asylum application, Facebook profile, a picture of her marriage with a French-Algerian lesbian, which she hoped would allow her to go back to Algeria. He presented me with the man he had never been, but that he was about to become. We finally became intimate. That is when I understood that Karim had not lied to anyone, as none of her multiple versions of the self was truer than the others. They were all true, as far as any version of the self can be true for anybody. Karim told everyone the version of herself that corresponded to the situation or relationship at that moment. He told me the complex masculinity story that fascinated me. He told the French authorities the humanitarian suffering version; what they

needed to hear in order to believe that he was a genuine refugee. I still remember her telling me, while looking at her marriage pictures, "it's suffering that gives you papers, you know? Not happiness. Happiness is for friends, for people who understand." I was so glad to have been included amongst the second group.

"It's suffering that gives you papers, you know? Not happiness. Happiness is for friends, for people who understand."

My ethnofiction *Samira* shows Karim as he changes identity, crosses borders, moves from one screen to another and leaves one setting in order to inhabit another as a way of existing in multiple dimensions. The two screens embody the biographical border by representing the dualism and normativity that fragment and aggregate subjectivity responding to hegemonic humanitarian repertoires and sexual stories. It was in order to represent Karim's complex sense of self and our fragmented process of knowledge production that I decided to present her story by juxtaposing the selfrepresentations that emerge in different situations, relationships and settings: ethnographic observations in the street and at Samira's, a medical visit, an interview with the OFPRA case adjudicator (French Office for the Protection des Refugees and Stateless People), shopping in the city centre, sitting at a café next to the street market. Each situation presents different aspects of Samira's story and subjectivity, while highlighting the evolving directions of her mobile orientation.

Each version is 'true' and authentic in relation to the biographical borders and existential priorities at work in each situation and at different stages of her life. The two screens allow viewers to observe Samira as she crosses different biographical and geographical borders within and between different screens and settings. As she leaves one setting to inhabit another as part of her multiple dimensions. They embody the concept of biographical borders by representing the dualisms and normativity that fragment and aggregate subjectivity in relation to research and sexual humanitarian initiatives.

Samira crossing biographical borders.

12 Samira never explicitly told me the story she gave to OFPRA, nor did she provide me with details of her biographical border crossing. She never actually told me that Karim's experience of being perceived as an 'effeminate' boy had positioned him in the world of women. Or that it was in order to keep being with his girlfriend, or rather to 'become' his girlfriend also called Samira, that Karim started taking hormones. She could not have, not as she was embodying Samira, while selling sex on the street. It would have been like talking about another person, another person that could not exist while she was in Samira mode, even if it was part and parcel of the same subjectivity.

I never managed to meet Samira as Karim during the day, although she invited me for coffee and stood me up quite a few times, nor was I allowed to be present during her visit to the doctor. However, she did describe the parts of those conversations and situations she was more comfortable with while being Samira, a version of herself that responded agentively to the stigmatization and abuse she experienced at home and inhabited a world of seduction, survival and work on the streets of Marseille. In order to make up for the silences and omissions through which knowledge happened between us, I assembled the various versions of Samira and Karim to which I did not have direct access from the narratives and situations described in ethnographic interviews with people who had experienced similar experiences. The other Algerian transsexuals I interviewed in Marseilles told me about these other aspects. Their shared experiences and stories of feminization and marginalization at home were part of a shared collective story in which Karim also participated, which he confirmed once he finally allowed me to meet him "off scene" in his flat after work.

While on the street, Samira did not tap into her suffering or vulnerability. On the contrary, she expressed her perplexity about my life decisions, my identification as homosexual, and my disinterest regarding the possibility of re-entering heteronormativity. That is not exactly how she put it, but the message was loud and clear. "You cannot have the life of a queer, you know?", he tells me over and over again. "You have to get yourself a wife and some children! Who is going to wipe your arse when you're old otherwise, your boyfriend? Dream on…"

V.
Autoethnographic Ethno-fictions

13 My theoretical and ethnographic understanding of migrants' agency and subjectivity is embedded in the assemblage of mobile orientations, I conceptualize autoethnography as an assemblage of different creative practices of self-reflexive representation, including writing and ethnographic filmmaking. More specifically, following Denshire and Lee (2013: 11), I understand autoethnography as a strategic assemblage of modes of representation (interviews, ethnographic observation, documentary filmmaking) produced through a temporal and spatial study of my professional life as a researcher in order to "foreground, through juxtaposing multiple accounts one against the other, an uneasy, unstable relationship between the writer and the self she writes about".

While reviewing my own research and filmmaking in the context of this article, I can now better see a coherent creative trajectory inspired by an heterogeneous approach that American anthropologist Paul Stoller (1992: 2013) defines as both phenomenologically and radically empiricist: a 'sensuous' heuristic practice attempting to describe social life "from the perceptual orientation of the other" that "does not privilege theory over description", thought over feeling and sight over the 'lower senses' (touch, smell taste). Inspired by the sensuous scholarship of Stoller, Jean Rouch's ethno-fictional work and Sara Ahmed's 'queer' phenomenological approach, I tried not to limit myself, in my ethnographic filmmaking and ethno-fictional work, to engaging sensually and affectively with the phenomenology of people's mobile orientations. Following Devereaux, I used transference and countertransference to develop an intimate autoethnographic approach allowing me to analyze the inter-subjective and psycho-dynamic relations through which (self-) knowledge and self-knowledge happen in parallel (Devereaux, 1967). In doing this, I tried to queer, analyze and represent the regimes of knowability, experience and subjectification – i.e. the "fictions of the real" – through which knowledge, subjectivity and orientation happen within the neoliberal sexual humanitarian epistemology.

Often, when discussing my ethno-fictional work with the public, I encounter an implicit critique of its supposed claim to 'realness' and scientific representation. I do not think my ethno-fictions show real people and real situations, obviously. But I do think that they

bring to life characters and situations that are ethnographically, sociologically and anthropologically 'true' for a number of interrelated reasons. On a more positivistic level, I could defend the 'trueness' of my ethno-fictional work by highlighting how it reproduces 'real' research interviews and ethnographic dynamics accurately. Most importantly, I think my ethno-fictional characters and the situations are and feel socio-anthropologically true because they resonate psycho-dynamically, affectively and sensuously with the real dynamics and circumstances through which knowledge happened between me and the other subjects involved in the research process.

Through participative ethnofictions I aim to involve migrants in the analysis and representations of their experiences of crossing sexual humanitarian biographical borders.

The sociological and anthropological truth of *Samira*'s ethno-fictional assembling does not reside merely in its faithful reproduction of the original ethnographic conversations and situations. It is further validated by the fact that the very same inter-subjective differential exclusion I had experienced with Samira during fieldwork was reproduced between myself and Karl Sarafidis, the actor portraying her. Right in the middle of rehearsing, Karl Sarafidis left Marseille and went back to Paris to work on the character on his own. I experienced the same quality of frustration and anxiety as I had with the original research subject, Samira. Just as I experienced a great sense of frustration and anxiety with *Samira*, I had exactly the same experience with the original research subject. It was only then, when I thought I had lost control of the situation that I actually realised that the preparation of *Samira* was finally making sense affectively, inter-subjectively, and psycho-dynamically. That even though the ethno-fictional Samira could never be real, she was about to become anthropologically, sociologically and phenomenologically 'true'.

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Notes

1. Deliberating written without a distancing dash between self and representation

2. For a more detailed discussion of the genealogy of my agencing decision to leave Italy, see Mai 2007.

3. I was born into a left-leaning family in Modena, in Italy's 'red' region, Emilia Romagna which is characterised by a strong and enduring cultural, political and social hegemony by the left.

4. In 2015, the project produced a second ethno-fiction, *Travel*, on the history of biographical border crossing of a Nigerian migrant woman working in the Paris sex industry.

5. You can find a trailer and more information on Normal here: https://vimeo.com/50289487