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**Telling stories, re-imagining lives:  
An inter-disciplinary examination of arts-  
based methods & life-stories as a vehicle  
for self-expression among refugees &  
asylum seekers**

By Nelli Stavropoulou

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

Funded by the Leverhulme Trust CDT Centre for Visual Arts and Culture  
Department of Sociology, Durham University

February 2020

## Abstract

As news stories around the 'refugee crisis' permeated the British social imagination in a Brexit vote era, new questions around notions of belonging, borders, and (im)migration emerged. Refugees and asylum seekers, now more than ever, are represented in accordance to dominant narratives and in a variety of visual forms through news media, advocacy campaigns, films, and popular culture, amongst other means. Despite their hyper-visibility, stories of those seeking asylum are more often told about them by others rather than by those seeking asylum themselves. Asylum-seeking stories emerge within a matrix of power relations responding to different narrative landscapes, expectations, and audiences. Within the current 'hostile environment' in the United Kingdom (UK) and across Europe, the need to tell stories in a 'safe' space becomes imperative.

Through combining biographical work with arts-based methodologies, the project adopts an ethno-mimetic methodological framework that facilitated the production, exchange, and creative re-interpretation of stories of living in exile. An 18-month fieldwork period, involving life story interviews, creative sessions and photo-elicitation discussions, yields the data on which this study is based. Drawing on symbolic interactionism and social constructionism theories, this research examines how individuals seeking asylum (re)present themselves through their stories and explores how such experiences are negotiated by participants in an attempt to respond to the expectations of the 'good refugee'.

Through an exploration of interviewees' journeys (physical, legal and resettlement), this study reveals the enduring impact of immigration policies on individuals seeking asylum in the UK. More importantly, it identifies a particular sociopolitical moment that is defined by increased hostility, punitive policies, and disbelief, as well as legal, cultural, and narrative expectations over asylum seekers' 'deservingness'. This thesis argues that an arts-based approach to research can transform individuals' lives by allowing them to participate meaningfully in the production of knowledge; by feeding their creativity and existing storytelling skills into the research process; and by initiating a safe space for participants to tell personal stories that may remain unheard as a result of the narrative expectations of the deserving/undeserving; weak/strong; grateful/ungrateful 'refugee' (Sales 2002; Taylor 2016; Stavropoulou 2019: 94).

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## Declaration

I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has been previously submitted by me or any other person for a degree in this or any other university. In all cases, where it is relevant, material from the work of other has been acknowledged appropriately.

## Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation or images from it should be published without the author's prior consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. J.', written on a white background.

## Acknowledgments

This PhD journey was shaped by the relationships and stories I had the privilege to form, hear, and share. Through the Leverhulme Doctoral Training Programme in Visual Culture organized by the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture I was able to work with a truly interdisciplinary and dedicated supervisory and advisory committee, whose support, expertise and viewpoints invited me to step out of my comfort zone(s) and be creative. This PhD would have been completely different without you all.

Special thanks to my PhD supervisors and advisors: To Dr Alison Jobe for her emotional support, her dedication, trust and willingness to read through so many chapter drafts. To Professor Janet Stewart for her encouragement to think things differently and for her reassuring words at each step. To Professor Kate Hampshire for inciting in me a love for ethnography and for reminding me that I can push my limits and reach higher. I am forever grateful to Professor Maggie O'Neill for letting me know about this doctoral funding opportunity - it really changed my life. Thank you for being a stable source of inspiration, mentorship and support throughout the past four years, as well as a wonderful collaborator to co-produce with.

Special thanks also to Professor Ludmilla Jordanova for her ongoing support, dedication and kindness. Thank you for creating a CVAC community for us. I am grateful for the friendship of all my CVAC colleagues - a big thank you to Vanessa, Lara and Marcus for our many conversations and pep-talks through various coffee catch ups. Thank you to the Counterpoints Arts team for welcoming me at your office during my three-month placement and for our ongoing collaborations. Thank you also to all CVAC members and especially, to Kathryn Moore and Dr Eris Williams Reed for their help throughout these years. Special thanks to Dr Susan Frenk whose ongoing support and generosity over the past six years has been invaluable.

Thank you to all my postgraduate colleagues and members of staff at the Department of Sociology. Thank you also to all members of the *Centre for Social Justice and Community Action* and in particular to Professor Sarah Banks, Dr Andrew Orton, Dr Sui Tin Kong and Professor Andrew Russel - it's been brilliant to learn from all of you.

This PhD would not have been possible without the stories and trust of all participants and project collaborators. Thank you to 'Azadeh', 'Lina', 'Khaled', 'Youssef', 'Aayansh', 'Caleb', Kath Boodhai, Aleksandra Dogramadzi, Hazel Barron-Cooper and Katharine Jones. I am very proud to have met and learned from all of you. I am honoured and grateful for the trust you have showed me in sharing your stories and experiences. Thank you all.

Most importantly, special thanks to my family. Thank you to my mother for inciting in me the love for stories and for being the primary storyteller in my life. Thank you for always believing in me and for being there. Thank you to my grandfather for being my number one supporter and my personal hero. Thank you to my auntie Eve, my cousins George and Nick, to Maria K., my friends Nefeli, Mairi, and Nat for all your support and care.

A heartfelt thank you to my husband for reminding me it will all work out, for challenging my thought-process, for his formatting tutorials and for listening to millions of ideas, fears, hopes and stories. Thank you for being in my life and for the opportunity to share yet another important life-experience with you. Thank you also to Ziggy for being my loyal study companion and the sweetest excuse for breaks.

Thanks also to the Leverhulme Trust for funding my PhD and to Durham University for being part of my academic journey. I wouldn't have it any other way.

## Preface

I have always been fascinated by stories. I grew up with 'home-made' fairytales, imaginatively sewn together by my mother every night. More importantly my grandfather's story of being deported from Turkey in 1964 due to the political situation between the Turkish and the Greek governments has been a recurring story through the past twenty-years. As my grandfather grew older so did the importance and value of his story. It became a story of loss, a story of new beginnings and a story of re-defining oneself and building a new life. It wasn't until I embarked on this academic journey that I realized how important exilic memories are and how forcibly they can shape one's life trajectory. As Ricoeur (1991), Bruner (1987) and Mead (1934) inform us, stories play an important role in our everyday lives. Stories serve as foundations for shaping our narrative identity, functioning as tools for us to re-present ourselves to others and making sense of our lives. In a sense through this project, I have adopted the role of the storyteller – not in terms of fabricating or sharing fables and anecdotes, but by oscillating between the role of the *active* listener and that of the *reflexive* storyteller. This thesis is my research story. It assumes a linear structure but is also defined by its plurality of individual stories that co-exist and complement each other. Finally, it anticipates and responds to an audience – as all stories do.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather with immense love and pride.

# Chapter One: Introduction

Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit- in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever.

**Chinua Achebe (1987: 153)**

## 1.1 Research Focus: Aims and Research Questions

Through the combination of biographical and arts-based research methodologies, my investigation explores the storytelling processes of individuals seeking asylum in the UK between 2015 and 2017. This thesis seeks to analyse and understand the different roles of stories as well as their position within the wider social, and narrative frameworks within which they become situated and respond to (Plummer 1995; 2000; Woodiwiss 2009). Moreover, this thesis examines the role of stories on different levels including how they support self-representation and meaning-making, leading to their political and social role in constructing, framing and communicating particular social issues - in this case social 'problems', such as the 'refugee crisis'.

Although there is a large body of research documenting experiences of forced displacement, most of it has been produced by individuals who are not forced migrants themselves; the individuals who are experts on their own experiences rarely become actively involved in representing their own worldview (O'Neill 2007; 2008). The sharing of personal stories of seeking asylum is found in competition with the discourses and main narratives *about* individuals seeking asylum as represented *by* others, which set in motion processes of classification and labelling (Wroe 2012; Smith 2014). Personal stories of forced displacement are subject to an interwoven set of power relationships, narratives and competing voices (i.e. media, politics), making the need for such stories to be heard imperative (Hebing 2009).

This is where the importance of individuals engaging with and reflectively representing their experiences becomes crucial through this study's 'ethno-mimetic approach' (O'Neill 1999; 2002). O'Neill defines 'ethno-mimesis' as the combination of ethnographic participatory action research (PAR) and participatory arts informed by the work of Adorno and Benjamin on mimesis (O'Neill 2007: 72). In their 2006 paper, O'Neill and Harindranath (2006: 44) highlight

the importance of biography and ethno-mimesis in engaging with lived experiences of forced displacement:

Biographical research is involved in the production of meaning, and offers resistance to the dominant power/knowledge axis related to asylum and refuge in the current politics of representation we find in some media messages and images. Biographical research can do this in the production of alternative and renewed narratives that generate social knowledge to inform, raise awareness and empower.

My research explores how biographical research and PAR as ethno-mimesis can support the production of such 'alternative narratives' while also examining how individuals seeking asylum live and interpret such an experience through their stories. In order to examine critically how individuals seeking asylum construct meaning through storytelling, this thesis sets out to answer two principal research questions.

My first question focuses on ***How are people seeking asylum storying their experiences?***

Through this question I've explored the complexity of refugee experiences and analysed how individuals narrate and make sense of their lives through the stories they share (Bruner 1987; 2003). My analysis has also allowed me to understand how stories of seeking asylum emerge within particular cultural moments that are shaped by dominant cultural, social and legal narratives. In particular, my analysis uncovers how stories of forced displacement reveal a particular hostile climate towards them. As I'm interested in the stories that people choose to share about themselves, this question has four sub-research questions directed at the role and nature of such stories. These questions are informed by the work of Plummer (1995; 2000), Frank (2010) and Riessman (2005; 2008), among others. First, ***What kind of stories do refugees and asylum seekers tell about their lives?*** Secondly, ***What do personal stories of seeking asylum accomplish?*** And finally, ***How do such stories emerge within and interact with particular social, structural and narrative contexts?***

My second research question focuses on this investigation's methodological approach and asks ***What is the cultural value of participatory arts methods for individuals seeking asylum?***

Through this question I've explored the possibilities and challenges of engaging individuals seeking asylum in participatory creative production while also examining their personal creative production practices. This question also has sub-research questions seeking to highlight the potential of using such methodologies in relation to personal expression, knowledge production and praxis. First, ***How do individuals seeking asylum re-interpret and represent their lives experiences through creative expression?*** Secondly, ***Can arts-based research methods support social justice through knowledge production?*** And finally, ***Can ethno-mimesis offer a window to these experiences?***

Caring deeply about this area of study, I started my research with a 'particular sense of purpose' (Andrews 2014: 28). My personal experience as a community artist working with diverse underrepresented communities prior to my doctoral study, had equipped me with an appreciation of the liberating effect of creative expression in allowing untold stories to be represented through imaginative avenues. More importantly, my family's history and in particular, my grandfather's experience, guided my commitment to understanding how such experiences of loss and new beginning(s) can mark one's understanding of their life and in extension influence their self-representation.

Interestingly, I only realised how influential my grandfather's experience had been in relation to my research while reflecting on my own motivations. My research *was* motivated and *is* shaped by my personal biography and my family's history. The same way I cannot 'fully' tell my story without first sharing my parents and grandparents' stories, equally I could have not completed this research without the knowledge of my grandfather's experience. I believe such knowledge offered me more compassion, a sense of determination to continue, as well as an analytical curiosity to understand the relationship between personal storytelling, representation and self-identity.

## **1.2 Background and Research Context**

My research emerged during the unravelling of the refugee crisis in 2015, which saw more than 1.25 million individuals crossing the borders of the European Union (UNHCR, 2016). The number of people displaced increased throughout 2015 starting with 5,500 in January and rising to 221,000 in October (UNHCR 2016). This was not a new phenomenon. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, more than five million people have sought refuge abroad while six million people have become internally displaced (Human Rights Watch 2018:

np). The civil war emerged as a result of anti-government protests against President Bashar al-Assad inspired by similar protests that were part of the Arab Spring (Khan 2018: 591). By the end of 2011, the situation had escalated into armed warfare between forces loyal to the President and oppositional groups. At the same time, conflicts in Yemen, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, and Nigeria were also contributing factors of the mass population movement. The magnitude of displacement reached critical levels in 2015 as the number of individuals on the move was the highest since the Second World War (UNHCR 2016).

What was initially referred to as a 'Mediterranean crisis' eventually became recognised as a 'European crisis', bringing the problem of the 'crisis' closer to home for European states and challenging notions around domestic politics, 'fortress Europe's' border control, and humanitarian assistance (Ibrahim 2005; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). According to Eurostat figures, EU members received more than 1.2 million first-time asylum claims in 2015, with Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Austria receiving almost two-thirds of the EU's total applications (Eurostat 2016). The allegedly 'uncontrollable' influx of asylum seekers resulted in many European States reinstating internal borders, biometric registration processes and external walls in order to keep people out (Phillimore 2018: np).

The complexity, duration and size of the mass displacement gave rise to domestic mass media across Europe to become involved in classifying and explaining *who* the refugees are, *where* they were coming from, *why* and *how* their arrival would impact recipient countries (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017: 1749 original emphasis). The conceptualization and reception of issues such as migration is greatly influenced by media representations as mass media are central channels through which domestic and foreign politics are disseminated and can set agendas, frame debates, and provide information for citizens to make sense of their social realities (Berry et al. 2016: 5; Allen 2016). Academic literature on media representations of minority groups such as migrants, asylum seekers and refugees has outlined the importance of media coverage in shaping public understanding through influencing the social construction of particular groups and in extension their identities, rights and cultural particularities (Ferjani 2007; Siapera 2010; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017: 5). As Cottle (2000) argues:

The media occupy a key site and perform a crucial role in the public representation of unequal social relations and the play of cultural power. It is

in and through representations, for example, that members of the media audience are variously invited to construct a sense of who “we” are in relation to who “we” are not (Cottle 2000: 2).

While social media also played an important role in engaging with the unprecedented mass population movements towards Europe, the role of mainstream media remained pivotal in providing information and framing the ‘crisis’ as a ‘problem’ (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017: 4).

Theories of social constructionism are helpful in understanding how social problems become constructed and how meaning is socially created and attached to events through the use of language (Spector and Kitsuse 2001; Loseke 1999). Social constructionism recognises that individuals develop knowledge of their world within a social context and so what is accepted as ‘true’ is socially constructed and rests on shared assumptions. If individuals ‘make the world’ through naming, identifying conditions and offering them meaning this is also the case for social problems. According to Loseke (1999) a social problem does not exist until it is named and is defined as such. In *Thinking about Social Problems: An Introduction to Constructionist Perspectives*, Loseke (1999/2017) outlines certain conditions that are integral to defining a social problem as identified by numerous scholars of social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1997; Best 2007). First, a social problem indicates that something is *wrong* and may cause harm to a particular group of people. Secondly, the status of a social problem needs to be *widespread* and affect a significant percentage of people. Thirdly, it also involves a sense of optimism as it presupposes that something can be *changed*. Finally, more importantly and relevant to this analysis, a social problem is recognised as a condition that *should* be changed and therefore implies the need to ‘take a stand that *something needs to be done.*’ (Loseke 2017: 6-7 original emphasis).

Within the European context, asylum granting became constructed and perceived as a problem through the use of ‘a story of massive moments of populations that have the potential to disrupt the living conditions, security and welfare of host communities’ (Matar 2017: 293). As Ken Plummer (2006: 4) reminds us, ‘stories are not just practical and symbolic actions: they are also part of the political process.’ Stories become implicated in social processes of power and politics as they serve as instruments of persuasion (Loseke 2018: 6) and may inform the way in which social issues are understood.

The role of narratives and their social use and consequences (Loseke 2018: 6) is particularly relevant in understanding how certain events, become framed in such a way to create a 'moral panic'. The notion of 'moral panic' was first used by Young (1971) in his work on subcultures and drug use. Utilising conceptual tools such as labelling theory, symbolic interactionism and social psychology, Cohen (1972) further developed the concept in his analysis of reactions to the disturbances caused by 1960s youth subcultures such as the Mods and Rockers. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the concept is defined as a situation in which:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (1972: 9)

A moral panic serves as 'an act of othering' supported through processes of labelling and definition (Tong and Zuo 2019: 446; Young 2005). Through the construction of stigmatizing norms and stereotypical representations, individuals become defined as 'folk devils' (Tong and Zuo 2019: 446). Cohen defines 'folk devils' as 'social types' functioning as 'visible reminders of what we should not be' (1972: 10). Cohen later (2002) identified refugees and asylum seekers as the modern 'folk devils' of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, due to their perception as 'aliens', 'bad citizens' or a threat to national values and/or interests (Delante 2008: 677; Khan 2012: 54).

Since Cohen's definition, various scholars have provided similar definitions and critiques of moral panics (Hall et al. 1978; Silverman and Wilson 2002; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). In their more recent analysis of moral panics, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 33-38) presented five criteria that are essential for a moral panic to occur. Those defining features include: First, A level of *concern* over the actions of a group of people that causes social anxiety; Secondly, A high level of *hostility* towards that group of people; Thirdly, There must be a general public *consensus* and collective concern that this group poses a direct threat; Fourthly, The perceived threat of the group is *disproportionate* to the actual level of risk and threat; and Finally, Reaction towards this group must be *volatile*, rising quite suddenly and easily dissipating.

The notion of moral panic lends itself as a useful conceptual tool to understand the different stages of the co-constructed nature of the 'refugee crisis' in the UK. By July 2015, the 'refugee crisis' was receiving increasing media documentation as the initial stories of mass drownings in the Mediterranean were becoming interweaved with rising concern and stories about migrant acts of violence and terrorism threats (Georgiadou and Zaborovski 2018: 8). Such a collective social anxiety was further amplified by hostile narratives directed towards asylum seekers through introducing notions of criminality and inauthenticity, while differentiating between 'opportunistic migrants' and 'helpless refugees.' As a response to concerns over rising numbers of migrants, new policies were introduced thus minimizing the 'risk' of depleting the UK's welfare system.

An example of how the notion of refugees invading Europe was communicated through political cartoons across some publications is provided in Figure 1, which portrays a 'tsunami of refugees' fleeing Syria as a result of the ongoing conflict. The image presents a wave of individuals headed towards Europe's shore where a couple is leisurely sunbathing. Some of the 'refugees' are smiling, while the individual at the top of the wave, who appears to be male, is getting ready to jump onto European territory. The static couple on the beach is overshadowed by the large wave. Communicating a sense of movement and force, it emphasizes the idea of migration as a natural force that, as Castano et al (2017) note, is thought to exert an 'uncontrollable power and disastrous consequences for host communities' (2017: 249).

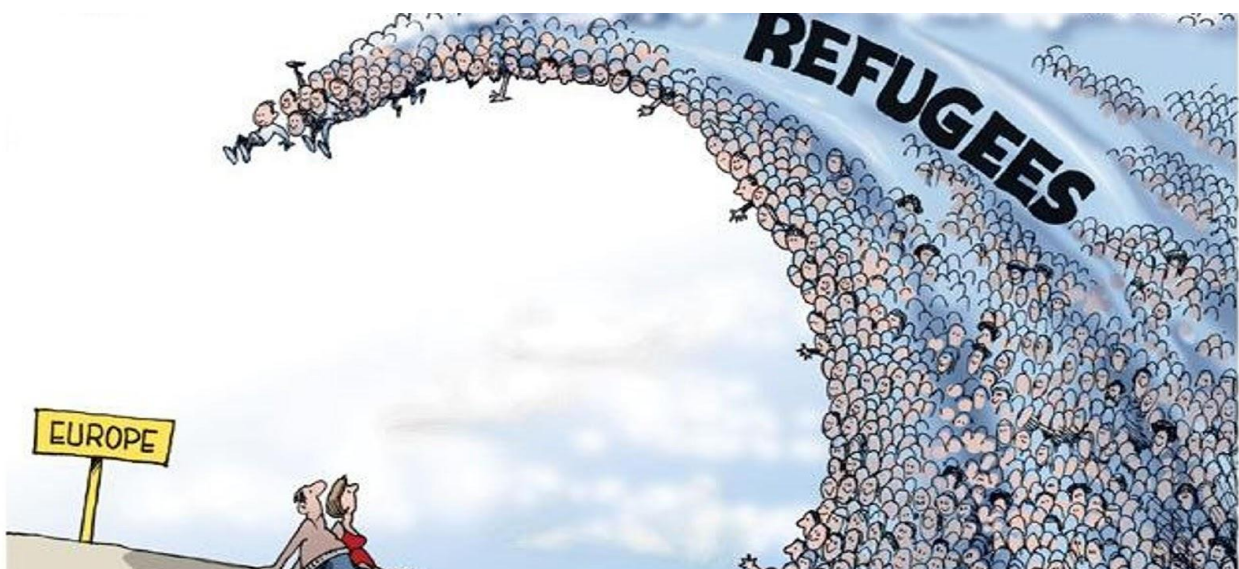


Figure 1: Waves of Syrian Refugees in Europe cartoon by Gary Varvel. Originally published via IndyStar 17/09/2019.

In his paper on conceptualisations of forced displacement, Turton (2003: 6) identified the prevailing use of liquid substances as a means of making sense of and constructing immigration flows as 'some kind of natural event, an inexorable process which its own logic and force.' The idea of forced migration as an uncontrollable force that needs to be contained further supports distinctions between nations as 'containers' and asylum seekers as the 'fluid' that overflows and stretches European countries to their 'breaking point' (Castano et al. 2017: 255). Despite collective anxiety over Europe being 'overstretched', when looking at statistics the numbers reveal a different image as Europe received approximately one million individuals seeking asylum in 2015, which accounts for 0.2 of its total population (Eurostat 2016).

As the refugee crisis developed, stories about refugees found in national media and the political arena became more focused on issues of criminality. Research across Europe has identified how recent asylum practices are increasingly subject to a 'criminalization trend' (Brouwer, van der Woude and van der Leun 2017: np), as immigration policies serve as exclusionary mechanisms to further disadvantage and obstruct those who apply for asylum (Oswin 2001; Bloch and Schuster 2005; Castles 2004). The criminalization supported and justified the prevalence of a more punitive and hostile policy framework that acknowledged assumptions that individuals arriving in the UK illegally are exploiting the 'asylum route' in order to access welfare opportunities (Neumayer 2005: 49; Geddes 2005). Such developments in stricter and more repressive responses to immigration, support the wider phenomenon of 'crimmigration'- a term that was introduced by Juliet Stumpf (2006) in order to explain the convergence of criminal law and immigration law (see also Hartry 2012; Legomsky 2007; Sklansky 2012).

Figure 2 serves as an example of a particular framing of the 'migrant' and *not* the 'refugee' crisis' - as explicitly stated by the newspaper's use of the word 'migrants', which communicates the idea of migrants being a possible strain to the UK's welfare system. British newspaper *Daily Express* is a right-wing newspaper which similarly to other newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* during the events of 2015-2016 published several articles that expressed 'hostility towards refugees and migrants' (Berry et al. 2016: 10). Words such as 'milking', 'benefits', 'rob' and 'economic migrants', express disbelief towards asylum seekers and shift the emphasis from refugees 'at risk' towards refugees 'as risk' (Gray and Franck 2019: 276).



Figure 2: Collage of different frontpages of British newspaper, Daily Express adopting a particular representation frame which reinforces notions of threat, invasion and risk to welfare and national security.

The UK has frequently been criticised for cultivating a 'hostile environment' through the adoption of governmental policies and procedures aimed at identifying, controlling, and reducing the number of individuals seeking in the UK with no right to remain (Goodfellow 2019). In the UK, the 1993 *Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act* was the first piece of legislation to outline asylum procedures and to respond to the requirements of the Refugee Convention (Rotter 2010: 54). Since 1997, several pieces of legislation have been introduced in response to rising numbers of migrants, while also 'indicating the growing level of public concern over asylum and immigration issues' (Rotter 2010: 54). Moreover, since the late 1990s, immigration and race have been identified as one of the most pressing issues facing the UK, with an increased desire to reduce the number of immigrants entering the UK and introducing tighter immigration control mechanisms (Crawley et al 2012: 2-3).

The notion of 'hostility' dates back to 2010, when the UK Border Agency introduced the aim to 'make the UK a hostile environment for those that seek to break our laws or abuse our hospitality' (Home Office 2010: 7). The former Home Secretary Theresa May used the same term in an interview with the *Telegraph* in 2012: 'The aim is to create here in Britain a really

hostile environment for illegal migration (...) What we don't want is a situation where people think they can come here and overstay because they're able to access everything they need.' (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). May's interview response highlights how her political narrative supported a purpose-driven government agenda that responded to public fears and media manipulation of rising migration in the UK, while also demonstrating the important role of the media in legitimizing new policies (Kinney 2015; Van der Woude et al. 2014).

During May's term of office as Home Secretary, a range of different measures were introduced restricting all kinds of immigration. More recently, the Immigration Act (2016) introduced stricter policies in relation to 'illegal working' through the use of criminal sanctions and the introduction of new requirements for banks and building societies to review existing accounts and to notify the Home Office of any suspicion that individuals had no right to remain (Burnett 2016: 11). Moreover, it extended the statutory authority for public authorities such as local councils and NHS trusts to share information for immigration control purposes and to supply national documents upon request from immigration officers.

The hostile environment is a sprawling web of immigration controls embedded in the heart of our public services and communities. The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support. Landlords and employers can face fines and even criminal sanctions if they fail to do so. (Liberty 2018: 5 cited in O'Neill et al 2019: 131)

As O'Neill et al (2019) note, the hostile environment is both the medium and the outcome of 'brutal policies' (Liberty 2018: 4 cited in O'Neill et al 2019: 131). Ultimately the hostile environment accomplished the shift of the 'burden of proof' - forcing migrants to prove their right to remain in the UK in all facets of their everyday lives, i.e. housing, banking, health care etc. (Consterdine 2018: np). Through introducing several control mechanisms, it shifted the burden of surveillance and monitoring to other public and private sectors, while also effectively assigning them the role of immigration enforcement officers.

The risk of the hostile environment's 'targeted' approach was fully manifested with the Windrush scandal in 2018, which saw a number of Commonwealth British citizens finding

themselves unable to prove their right to remain after decades of living in the UK because they did not have correct documentation. The Windrush scandal serves as a clear example of how immigration practices have adopted a more punitive nature, highlighting the burden of proof in relation to one's right to be in the UK and outlining how such a burden rests with the individual (see Garland 1996; Garland 2001). Moreover, it exemplifies the constructed nature of 'deserving' individuals juxtaposed against those who have no legal right to be in the UK, a narrative trope that was heavily deployed during the time-frame 2015- 2016.

As this section has outlined, the constructed nature of migration as a 'moral panic', a 'crisis' or a 'social problem' is not a novel phenomenon. Since at least the early 2000s, asylum and immigration issues are being constructed in the media and in public discourses in terms of a 'crisis' (Rotter 2010: 61). Such a crisis occurs on a national level in relation to 'inadequate' immigration control mechanisms that cannot respond to the uncontrollable number of individuals entering the UK and posing a threat to societal security (Rotter 2010: 61). As a result, new policies are being introduced in order to respond to such issues of national security and welfare. Moreover, such a feeling of 'crisis' becomes further fuelled by media and political discourses that warn of such an 'invasion' and 'prove' that 'migration is out of control' (Crawley 2005: 4). Ultimately, such 'hostile' constructions of asylum seekers as a 'threat and a problem' reinforce dominant ways of classifying individuals seeking asylum and function as 'a conception more conducive to the development of hostility towards them than acceptance' (Hartmann and Husband 1974: 208).

### **1.3 Overview and Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is organised in seven chapters. The notion of the journey is employed as a helpful concept, metaphor, and a structuring device throughout this thesis offering a tripartite structure that focuses on: a) physical journeys; b) legal journeys; and c) resettlement journeys. The notion of the journey complements the conceptualisation of one's exilic journey as it draws attention to notions of movement, time, space and materiality. This research resists to the idea of a 'final destination' and instead focuses on the in-between process, the changes and new experiences that emerge as well as the stories that become produced in an attempt to provide order, acquire meaning, and review lived experiences.

The concept of the journey is a prominent theme across participant accounts. Narrated accounts sit within a core dataset of twelve principal participants and a larger number of

seventy five participants with whom I interacted during an eighteen-month period of fieldwork. Each discussion chapter opens with a short vignette introducing a principal participant's story that is representative of the majority of participants' shared experiences, but equally allows for my analysis to engage with the complexities of individual experiences and competing narratives. Participant accounts are explored with an emphasis on identifying common themes, while also attending to individual differences in lived and recounted experiences in terms of individuals' intersected particularities including gender, social class, age, nationality, sexuality, physical appearance, and race and ethnicity, among others.

*Chapter Two* presents a literature review of the areas of research to which this research seeks to contribute: refugee studies and arts-based research (ABR). As I am particularly interested in the ways in which individuals seeking asylum are talked about and the effect of such stories on their identities, my review primarily focuses on two core areas of legal definitions and dominant narratives (textual and visual). The way that asylum seekers are talked about matters as their representation as either 'victims' or 'threats' presupposes different responses; either the moral obligation to protect or the need to keep them out. As a response to resisting and potentially disrupting dominant narratives, arts-based research offers opportunities for participants to tell their stories through employing their imagination and creative skills. Moreover, arts-based research offers opportunities for self-expression, meaning-making and creative freedom. Equally, it may raise issues of visibility, privacy, ownership and well-being, as well as introduce 'creative' barriers that may limit or obstruct participation.

*Chapter Three* offers a discussion of the study's methodological approach and its epistemological framework. Through adopting an ethno-mimetic approach this thesis seeks to shift the focus from the type of stories told *about* asylum seekers (as introduced in earlier chapter) to those told *by* individuals seeking asylum. However, it still recognises that stories operate within a social context and as such all stories need to be situated within the wider social and cultural space that frames my analysis. The act of storytelling is complex and tensions may arise relating to what kind of stories are safe to share, the use of particular words and the different audiences they respond to, thereby determining the purpose of such stories (Fancott 2016).

A symbolic interactionist approach with a focus on the activities and interactions between social actors, supports my understanding of how stories are shared between individuals. In

combining symbolic interactionism with ethno-mimesis, I am able to understand how participants' stories respond to symbols and meanings attached to particular situations and events, in this case the asylum granting experience. Adopting an intersectional lens allows my analysis to recognise the diversity of experiences of seeking asylum and the range of participants' intersectional identities that make their experience unique. An intersectionality approach has been employed both as part of my methodology (acquiring a range of methods to respond to different needs) as well as in my analysis. Underlying my analysis is the fundamental notion that individuals' social positions are influenced by intersecting factors of difference (i.e. age, class, race, financial/social capital or faith etc.) which shape their experiences and in extension their stories. Integral to this chapter is also my own methodological story of how I developed, tested and delivered my ethno-mimetic toolkit and how my role as a researcher changed over time. An ethical and reflexive approach is fundamental to participatory research in order to ensure that participant safety is protected, while also accepting the responsibility and potential resurface of trauma when including individuals in such a creative 'encounter'.

*Chapter Four provides* a detailed analysis of research participants' journey experiences to the UK. In engaging with narrated experiences of physical journeys, this chapter addresses motivations and expectations regarding 'destination' country and reflects on the notion of 'choice'. As my analysis outlines, the nature of forced migration is complex, therefore oppositional typologies such as 'forced-voluntary' cannot adequately engage with the full spectrum of asylum-seeking experiences (Erdal Bivand and Oeppen 2017). Each journey is different and particular to the person completing it due to their political, social, cultural and financial resources, as well as their demographic characteristics. A notable difference between experiences of seeking asylum relates to gender as the majority of female participants escaped gender-based violence (family abuse, sexual abuse), whereas most male participants fled persecution (political and religious) and military enforcement. An intersectional analysis has been fundamental in understanding how the intersection of different characteristics influenced each participants' journeys (i.e. reasons, conditions, access to technology, physical hardship), as well as their visibility as asylum seekers (ethnicity, race, gender). Through introducing the notion of 'choice', this chapter addresses the wider consequences of how the lack of such a choice affirms the dominant narrative of asylum seekers as 'worthy victims', while making the point that asylum seekers can also make choices – albeit limited (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2018: 24).

*Chapter Five* presents an analysis of participants' narrated experiences of asylum determination processes. This chapter also offers an overview of the legal pathway for requesting asylum in the UK and outlines the 'objective' parameters of asylum policy and the importance of 'credibility' found on the nexus of official country information, media documentation and political discourses. My analysis presents how individuals recognise and respond to dominant narratives around 'authentic' and 'inauthentic refugees' and examines critically how they recognise the need to tell their stories in such way to access legal protection and 'tick all boxes' of their asylum claim. Moreover, my analysis examines how the image of the 'authentic' refugee becomes internalised, reproduced and performed by individuals seeking as they feel the need to not only sound but also look like a 'good refugee'. Finally, the importance of evidence - and what counts as evidence according to the system, is brought into focus as participants describe how their bodies may serve as evidence in support of their claims (i.e. physical injuries during imprisonment) or contradict their claims (i.e. issues of sexual orientation where the body does not 'look' homosexual).

*Chapter Six* examines participants' 'journeys of resettlement' within a 'hostile environment'. My analysis focuses on lived and narrated experiences of belonging and non-belonging in two cities in the North East of England: Newcastle Upon Tyne and Stockton-on-Tees. Newcastle Upon Tyne has been a main dispersal location in the North East while in the past five years, Stockton-on-Tees has also become one of the highest concentration locations after Middlesbrough, despite being identified as an area of high deprivation (Mayblin and James 2019). Concluding the thesis' ethnographic journey, this chapter examines how individuals experience and narrate their changing sense of belonging as they negotiate their new identity as an asylum seeker/refugee. It does so by first introducing the relationship amongst borders, citizenship and status acquisition in order to examine how migration status affects everyday life through legal and welfare constraints. Furthermore, it highlights how being identified as an 'asylum seeker' can set in motion processes of identification and stigmatisation and interrogates how stigma is also reproduced by asylum seekers themselves as they engage in 'internal' processes of differentiation in order to protect the image of the 'good refugee'.

Finally, the *Conclusion* brings this investigation to a close through a summary of emerging themes. This chapter also reflects on the methodology's potential in transforming the lives of research participants, while also addressing analytical, ethical, and practical challenges.

## Chapter Two: Researching Experiences of Forced Displacement

Exile thus goes into the feeder made of stars  
bearing clumsy grains to the birds born of time  
which never fall asleep in the fertile spaces of stirred up childhoods.

**Césaire (1983: 275)**

### 2.1 Chapter Overview

In this thesis I aim to contribute to two fields of scholarly research: refugee studies and arts-based research (ABR). This chapter begins by offering an overview of the interdisciplinary field of refugee studies, serving as a framework for my analysis and a context to participants' narrated experiences. In order to understand the ways in which individuals seeking asylum become conceptualised, in the following sections (2.3 and 2.4) I'll be examining both legal classifications and dominant narratives about asylum seekers and refugees. In particular, my analysis is framed by the 'European Refugee Crisis' as documented during 2015-2017, aiming to show how the visual and discursive construction of asylum seekers changed over time and how different stories shaped their conceptualisation and reception in the public and political domain. The next section (2.5) will then introduce my research's second principal field of interest, that of arts-based research in the field of forced displacement, while exploring possibilities and challenges of such a methodological approach.

### 2.2 Setting the Interdisciplinary Scene: Refugee Studies

A recurring process and integral to human experiences, individuals continue to traverse across borders in search of refuge (Gil-Bazo 2015). In his analysis of refugees in Canada, Dirks (1997: 1), argues how 'Refugees have been a recognizable feature of human society for as long as mankind has resided in organized groups.' Although there is no definite starting point for refugee studies as an independent research area, the emergence of a formal 'refugee protection regime' following World War Two, shaped the focus of the field (Malkki 1995: 506; Agamben 2013: 114). The research area of refugee studies remains a central focus of academic investigation in an attempt to understand, respond, and inform academics, policy makers, community workers and activists, among others, of the needs of individuals who are experiencing forced displacement (O'Neill 2010; Lenette 2019). Since the 1980s, the study of forced migration has drawn from a number of disciplines including anthropology, geography,

sociology, history, international relations, political science, law, medicine, psychology, women's studies and political science, among others (Mason 1999).

Chimni (2009: 14) identifies three key stages of development: the first one (1914 -1945) focused on the occupational abilities of refugees; the second one (1945 - 1982) examined life in refugee camps and organisational responses towards rising numbers of displaced individuals; and finally, the third one (1982 - 2000) solidified the emergence of refugee studies as a separate academic field (Cameron 2014: 7). In their introduction to their edited volume *Critical Perspectives on Migration in the Twenty-First Century*, Karakoulaki et al (2019: 1) refer to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the 'century of the migrant' given the rising number of displaced individuals across the world. In particular, since the start of the twenty-first century, the number of internationally displaced individuals has increased from 173 million in 2000, to 244 million in 2015 and reaching 258 million in 2017 (UN 2017; Karakoulaki et al. 2019: 1).

In her book *Arts-Based Methods In Refugee Research: Creating Sanctuary*, Lenette (2019) outlines the two principal areas of inquiry in the current research terrain of refugee studies. The first one examines the causes and process of forced displacement both across borders and internally and focuses on issues of statelessness and legal consequences of seeking humanitarian protection in other countries. The second area engages with individuals' and communities' lived experiences throughout their journeys including different elements of the complete 'refugee cycle' (Mason 1999: 2) such as reasons behind forced displacement, individual motivations, transitory routes, mobility, experiences of arrival, adaptation and integration, legal, social and political reception, coping skills as well as psychological effects, gender and age differences, among others (Mason 1999: 2).

In engaging with experiences of pre-migration, journey and resettlement, an extensive body of work has focused on the effects of trauma, emotional and mental difficulties (Fazel and Stein 2003; Marlowe 2010; Guruge et al. 2015). Studies from a biomedical perspective have primarily examined mental health problems as experienced by asylum seekers, and in particular focused on their vulnerability towards mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Montgomery 2011; Jakobsen 2017; Silove et al. 2017). Given the nature of forced displacement it is important to conduct research that explores the emotional and psychological impact of such an experience. Equally, it is important to acknowledge the exemplified agency and personal resilience as demonstrated by individuals in starting a 'new

life' that move beyond notions of 'refugees' as 'victims'. A solely trauma-focused analytical frame may become restrictive and thereby result in researchers' 'gaze' being restricted to 'transitions in lives rather than whole lives, to victims rather than survivors, to illness rather than health' (Brough et al 2003: 194). Such a focused 'gaze' can therefore deny the strength and resiliency exemplified by refugees (Watters 2008), as well as limit insights into processes of identity formation, negotiation and performance. As Lenette (2019: 53-4) observes

The preponderance of biomedical research is partly due to competitive grant-funding environments as funding bodies tend to favour proposals aimed at addressing 'problems', 'needs', 'deficits' and 'vulnerabilities'. While there is certainly a need to highlight issues, detrimental impacts and gaps in knowledge and practice to determine what to prioritise and how to allocate research and service funding, this may result in eclipsing the strengths and capabilities of people who have experienced arduous circumstances associated with forced migration. The danger is that the dominance of biomedical perspectives and the overbearing focus on illnesses and trauma can overshadow narratives of creativity, hope, resilience and wellbeing—although this trend is slowly beginning to shift through research using a sociocultural lens (for instance Lenette, Brough and Cox, 2013; Nunn, 2010).

Moreover, research that focuses primarily on the structural elements of forced displacement may also marginalize or even deny individual agency. As Hathaway (2007: 2) suggests this approach corresponds 'with preferred governmental and agency agendas which increasingly sacrifice the autonomy of the refugee himself or herself to broader migratory management goals'. She expresses the concern that such research does not directly challenge 'the downward spiral of the social and political commitment to respect the right of refugees' (2007: 2).

As Smith (2014: 16) observes, seeking asylum takes place in a global context, an interrelated aspect of broader transnational mobility, movements and migrations that occur across and within the national boundaries of countries and states (see also Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). Forced displacement scholars have critically engaged with the complex nature of migratory flows in

order to understand the causes, consequences, expectations, policies and individuals' lived experiences (Koser and Martin 2011; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016).

A common area of interest remains the difficulty of distinguishing between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration (Richmond 1993; Zetter 2007; Crawley and Skleparis 2017) as such differentiations do not adequately grasp the 'complex structural causes and consequences of flight' (Zetter 2007: 176), nor grasp the complexity of 'refugees' and *refugeeness* which includes intersectional personal and group histories; different socio-economic statuses; and psychological, mental, and physical situations and aspirations' (Cameron 2014: 6). Recent work within the field of refugee studies has adopted a broader understanding and definition including people fleeing natural disasters, structural violence, famine and civil war both across and within borders (Rotter 2006: 18).

Due to the interplay of both micro and macro-level factors influencing experiences of forced displacement there is no adequate linear model of explanation or a single 'theory of refugees' (Bascom's point (1998) noted in Black 2001: 66). The complexity of refugees and 'refugeeness' - (Cameron 2014: 6) - calls for an epistemological stance that does not treat refugees as 'objects of investigation' but as historically-situated social beings living in particular geopolitical and historical contexts (Nquyen 2019). It is therefore important to not essentialise the diverse historical and political contexts of refugee migration in order to produce what Malkki (1995) calls a universal 'refugee condition.' She notes that the

quest for the refugee experience (...) reflects a tendency, in many disciplines, to seize upon political or historical processes and then to inscribe aspects of these processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing them. In this way, very mobile, unstable social phenomena may be imagined as 'essential 'traits' and characteristics' attached to, or emanating from, individual persons.' (Malkki 1995: 511).

Instead, an analysis that contextualises asylum seekers/refugees and refugee studies in particular historical-social contexts and pays attention to their individual biographies and backgrounds can better support our understanding of how experiences of forced displacement become interpreted and described by individuals themselves (Cameron 2014; Nquyen 2019).

In the following sections I will engage with a selection of key themes that contextualise my investigation and to which my work responds through my findings. My research aims to highlight the complexity of experiences of forced displacement and the ways in which such experiences become captured through storytelling practices. Therefore, it is important to first outline the key definitions and labels attributed to individuals seeking asylum in order to fully understand the effect of such stories in relation to how their identities as 'refugees/asylum seekers' become constructed and how they may influence the ways in which they review their new identities and experience belonging in their host countries.

### 2.3 Definitions, Labels and Limitations

During 2015- 2017 the continuous reporting of individuals arriving on European shores raised issues of definition and differentiation as the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' were used interchangeably in media and public discourses (UNHCR 2016). As a response to the conflation of such terms, in July 2016 UNHCR published an online article on the importance of 'word choice' in order to educate the public on the appropriate wording and the differences between the two terms (UNHCR 2016). The blog post defined both terms drawing attention to notions of 'choice' and privileging the lack of the latter in the case of the 'refugees'. In the blog, a 'migrant' is defined as an individual who *chooses* to move from their country to improve their livelihood. In comparison, a 'refugee' is *forced* to leave in order to save his or her life. The way in which individuals seeking asylum are defined is a complex issue. The term 'refugee' as well as its affiliated terms 'asylum seeker', 'expellee' and 'undocumented migrant' to name a few - carries its own meaning and reflects the legal setting within which it has been developed and defined. In order to understand how definitions differ, it is helpful to first define what we legally mean by the different terms.

According to the United Nations Migration Agency (IOM), a migrant is any person who is moving across international borders or within a State away from his or her place of residence, regardless of their legal status, the motivations of such a movement, or the length of the stay in the host country (IOM n.d.) In comparison to terms such as 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker', the category of the 'migrant' is more challenging to define as it does not adequately encompass the wide range of people who choose to cross borders (Koser and Martin 2011).

An 'asylum seeker', on the other hand, is someone who is seeking international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees (Smith 2014: 16). Such a person

is currently waiting for an outcome regarding their asylum claim on the grounds of fearing for their lives due to persecution. In comparison, a 'refugee' is an asylum seeker whose claim has been processed as part of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) legal process and has been awarded Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) by the receiving nation state. The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, form the legal basis for states to grant asylum. Article 1 A (2) of the 1967 Protocol defines a refugee as someone who:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. [Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1A (2)].

The legally-recognised 'refugee' category took its contemporary form after the Second World War as a result of the unprecedented number of displaced individuals, which gave rise to a formal institutionalised 'refugee protection regime' (Cameron 2014: 8). World War II served as an impetus to develop internationally-recognised standards for the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of receiving states. Towards the end of 1950, the United Nations General Assembly established the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A year later the 1951 International Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was produced. The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees broadened the original definition by removing temporal and geographical restrictions of the 1951 Convention. The 1951 Convention, as a post-Second World War instrument, was originally limited to individuals fleeing events before 1 January 1951 and within Europe (UN General Assembly). The 1967 removed these limitations and offered the Convention universal coverage.

According to the Refugee Convention individuals who cannot access protection from their home countries are able to request humanitarian protection from other nation states, thereby becoming an 'object of concern' under international refugee law (Helton 2003: 20). An immediate implication of such a convention is the 'responsibility' it places upon host-nations and the inherent power imbalance it creates between receiver and received. In this context, responses to forced displacement become a matter of geopolitics and raise questions over notions of citizenship, security, and humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, as Crawley and Skleparis (2017: np) note, whilst the legal definition of a 'refugee' is offered by the Refugee

Convention, its 'interpretation and applications takes place at the national level reflecting national interests and priorities which change over time.'

Such a nation-centred response towards international and regional and refugee process, is reflected in UNHCR's Executive Committee's decision to adopt a conclusion specifically focusing on implementation of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which emphasized the need for states to adopt 'a positive and humanitarian approach' towards movements and reception of refugees. As Türk and Dowd (2014: np) note,

significant discrepancies remain in the ways in which states interpret and implement their obligations under the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, both in terms of determining who comes within their scope and the rights and entitlements of recognized refugees. Serious differences can lead to lower standards of protection for fewer people, which can in turn affect asylum flows and cause secondary movements of refugees.

Researchers have examined the limitations of the 'refugee' definition as it may exclude individuals who face life-threatening situations and may be seeking asylum for reasons different to persecution (Rotter 2016: 17). Furthermore, as Black (2001: 63) notes accepting such a convention without critical reflection may

contribute to the perception of the naturalness of the category of refugees and of different policies towards those who do and those who do not qualify for the label. The simple acceptance by social scientists of a legal definition might have some justification were this definition legally uncontested; yet as the burgeoning field of refugee law amply demonstrates, this is far from the case.

Another important limitation of the legal definition of 'refugee' rests on its gendered language which carries assumptions about persecution and legal protection that may neglect or exclude a number of groups such as women (Canning 2011). Feminist critiques of the 1951 Geneva Convention refugee definition highlight the prevalence of an androcentric and heteronormative assumption that does not recognise gender as a basis of persecution and that as Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014: 3) suggest needs to 'be redefined in order to recognise the political nature of female resistance to systems of oppression and violence within both the public and private spheres.' Such an androcentric approach has also been recognised officially by the UNHCR

which reported 'historically, the refugee definition has been interpreted through a framework of male experiences, which has meant that many claims of women and of homosexuals have gone unrecognised' (UNHCR 2002: 2).

As Smith (2014: 40) notes, the Refugee Convention is the product of a particular historical period and as such reflects the needs of people at that time. In this case, the dominant story of refugee focused on someone who was directly involved in political activity and was fleeing persecution. As a result, men were prioritized as genuine applicants and women were seen as dependents of men's political activities. However, by neglecting to recognise gender-based and gender-specific persecutions (Crawley 2000), the Refugee Convention would reflect only a small part of the international context (Canning 2011; Sirriyeh 2013). As my findings suggest, a dominant story of the 2015 'refugee crisis' would, for example, focus on someone fleeing the war in Syria due to political persecution. Equally as my fieldwork highlights, such a focused story may exclude or undermine alternative experiences of forced displacement and the complexity of such decision-making processes.

Distinguishing between migrants and asylum seekers holds important ramifications, as each category entails a particular level of assistance and protection under international law. The process of naming involves classification and is therefore inherently political as it reflects 'subjective perceptions of how people fit into different spaces in the social order and of the terms of which society should engage with them in varying contexts and at different points in time' (Moncrieffe 2007: 1; Crawley and Skleparis 2017: np).

A critically-engaged analysis of legal categories such as 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' also sheds light on the construction of the 'asylum applicant' in relation to power. The distinction between categories also translates into different classifications and subsequent treatments of individuals seeking asylum, as it underpins migration policy and informs legislation (Schuster 2016). As Rotter (2016: 21) argues, in the UK there are different statuses that individuals who have successfully sought asylum may occupy, each with its own corresponding legal rights and permissions including travel, access to education, housing, healthcare and welfare. Therefore, as Jansen and Löfving (2007: 8) note,

The commonality of 'refugee-ness' does not lie in a uniform experience of forced migration but rather in a forced engagement with the interplay of

structural factors such as state border regimes, legal frameworks regulating the relation between people and place, and humanitarian aid interventions.

Labels are impregnated with certain assumptions about individuals and although serving legal-institutional purposes may affect individuals as 'such objective labelling also risks muting the 'object's' voice and not accurately reflecting the 'truth' of his or her reality' (Cameron 2014: 5). In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of labels (i.e. trafficking victims; climate refugees etc.) as a result of more 'complex' migration population movements, as well as diverse reasons underpinning such movements i.e. human rights violations, environmental and physical catastrophes (Stepputat and Sørensen 2014; Lenette 2019: 4).

The study of labelling dynamics offers analytical opportunities to understand more about 'the agents, structures, and effects of labelling' (Stepputat and Sorensen 2014: np). Labelling can impact individuals' sense of belonging, their well-being (i.e. experiences of stigma) as well as their identity. Furthermore, labels can potentially de-link individuals from their stories, refusing their personal biographies and reducing them to standardized cases (Zetter 2007 Kebede 2010; Sajjad 2018).

The complexity of migratory flows became particularly evident to a European audience in 2015 which saw an unprecedented number of displaced individuals migrating within and across countries and most importantly from the global south to the global north. Alongside the rising numbers of individuals crossing borders, we also witnessed the mass circulation of photographic images of individuals as they embarked on life-threatening journeys in search of safety (Chouliaraki 2016). Such proliferating visual documentation contributed towards fueling a public imagination that simultaneously conceptualizes forced displacement as a humanitarian catastrophe, a threat to Europe's welfare, and an erosion of national borders and identities (Friese 2018: 45- 46). In order to understand the complex nature of representing forced displacement it is important to first unpack some of the dominant discursive frameworks used to define asylum seekers and refugees.

#### **2.4 Dominant Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers**

Extensive academic research has focused on how the use of metaphors and dominant conceptualisations have shaped European and British discourse on immigration as reflected in mass media, political speeches and social media (Van Dijk 2000; Musolff 2015; Lenette and

Cleland 2016; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). Dominant visual and discursive regimes have solidified the image of 'the refugee' as a universal, 'special kind' of person (Malkki 1996; Mannik 2012) that challenges 'here' or 'there' divisions and instead occupies a liminal space in relation to citizenship, belonging, and recognition. As Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017: 1751) note, refugees and asylum seekers are consistently represented across different platforms in essentialist ways that follows on the overarching binary understanding of refugees as 'vulnerable' victims and/or 'threatening' invaders (Judge 2010: 2; Sigona 2014; Musolff 2015).

Since 2014, a number of studies have examined the construction and reception of forced migration towards Europe; addressing changing Mediterranean border policies (Lendaro 2016); discursive representations of the 'deserving refugee' in Germany (Holmes and Castaneda 2016); social media representations of Syrian refugees (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016) as well as press coverage of the 'European crisis' through newsprint coverage in five EU member states, including the UK (Berry et al 2015; Langdon 2019: 95). This section develops upon these existing studies and introduces key dominant discourses of individuals seeking asylum. Furthermore, it discusses the discursive and visual framing of the 'European refugee crisis' during the timeframe 2015-2017 while addressing the wider social and political consequences of such constructions of forced displacement (Langdon 2019: 95).

### *Vulnerable Victims*

In her study on visual representations of refugees across UNHCR publications, Johnson (2011) discusses how the figure of the Cold War white male refugee who is prepared to defend Western political values has been replaced by a voiceless woman from the Global South holding a painfully thin child in her hands, beneath the caption 'Click to Donate' (Johnson 2011; Palillo 2017: 29). According to Palillo (2017), the feminization of the refugee category has failed to empower refugee women and instead has contributed toward the depoliticization of the 'refugee' figure through depicting refugees as 'a mere object of assistance in need of advocacy group and aid providers to speak on their behalf' (2017: 29).

Research into images of suffering - especially those of women and children - used in campaigns has identified how such images target emotional responses as a means to provoke donations and capture public interest (Malkki 1996; Johnson 2011). However, this has been criticised for 'inciting sympathy for passive suffering rather than support for active struggle' (Al Nawakil 2015: 11; see also Burman 1994; Ruddick 2003). Such a victimisation frame is often employed

by refugee advocacy organisations as a powerful ‘counter stereotype’ in order to present a more humanised and ‘positive’ image of refugees as vulnerable and dependent victims who have suffered trauma and are therefore worthy of protection (Pupavac 2008; Judge, 2010; Steimel 2010).

Despite advocacy voices asserting the universal human nature of refugees as people who are *just like us*, trauma may also function as an othering strategy that casts refugees ‘as something less than human’ (Nyers 2006: xvi). Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) explores how war imagery can be open to manipulation and re-interpretation and shows how popular representational practices tend to represent the suffering of others in ‘spectacular ways.’ In doing so, they establish a greater cultural distance and create a hierarchical relationship between victims and spectators. Ultimately, such an approach solidifies the basis for the problematic understanding of refugees as ‘lost’ objects of humanitarian assistance (Chouliaraki 2012) and confirms the ‘institutional, international expectation of a certain kind of helplessness as a refugee characteristic’ (Malkki 1996: 388).

The construction of the refugee as a passive victim of circumstances beyond one’s control (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017: np) echoes the notion of Christie’s ideal victim (1986). A central point in Christie’s conceptualisation of the ideal victim is their nature as ‘blameless’ for their victimisation (1986: 19). Building on Christie’s (1986: 21) notion, O’Brien (2013) introduces the ideal trafficking victim as weak, vulnerable and unable to attack. Similar to refugee advocacy campaigns and representations, humanitarian-led representations of trafficking victims appear to conform to particular constructed representational aesthetics. As she explains, ‘the imagery and stories chosen by anti-trafficking awareness campaigns contribute to the construction of a Madonna/whore dichotomy of victims of sex trafficking in the minds of decision makers and the general public’ (O’Brien 2013: 324; Farrell and Fahy 2009: 623). For example, Jahic and Fickenauer (2005) observed how human trafficking discourse supports understanding of victims as ‘young, usually uneducated, willing to move abroad, and attracted by a flashy lifestyle’ (see also Pearson 2002; Chapkis 2005; O’Connell). As O’Brien (2013: 321) notes, the targeted section of individuals as weak, young and/or vulnerable to be included in such campaigns, perpetuates what Christie identified as a societal expectation that the ideal victim can only be weak and that ‘sufficient strength to threaten others would not be a good base for creating the type of general and public sympathy that is associated with the status of being a victim’ (Christie 1986: 21).

September 2015 marked a key turning point in the 'story' of the refugee crisis by emphasizing the vulnerability of the thousands of people risking their lives while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In particular, September 2<sup>nd</sup> was marked by the circulation of the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's body washed ashore a Turkish beach in September 2015 (see Figure 3), taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir. The image quickly went viral, becoming a media spectacle, engraved in the collective imagination and 'shaming' Europe into taking action (Fernando and Giordano 2016; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017). The image was termed variously by different news publications as a 'wakeup call', a 'lightbulb moment', a 'switch to the world's conscience' and a 'tragic symbol' that became symbolically powerful and served as a representation of the wider crisis in relation to European responsibility (Bochenski 2015: np; Denselow 2015: np; O'Doherty 2015: np; International Business Times 2015: np; Burns 2016: 38).



Figure 3: Three-year-old Alan Kurdi, photographed by Nilüfer Demir, September 2, 2015.

According to a report by the University of Sheffield's *Visual Social Media Lab*, the image reached a total of almost 20 million people around the world within 12 hours and resulted in more than 30,000 tweets (Vis et al 2015: 10). D'Orazio (2015) also noted that the images caused an increase in tweets about asylum seekers and refugees, while Chouliaraki and Zaborowski

(2017) noted an increase in humanitarian and media reporting with a focus on personal stories. According to Fernando and Giordano (2016: np):

The figure of Alan became the emblem of innocence and injustice, mobilising an international public outcry about the destruction brought by the Syrian civil war, the cruel forms of trafficking it has produced, and the ineffective European response to that humanitarian crisis.



Figure 4: A paramilitary police officer carries the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi off the shore of Bodrum, Turkey. Source: Associated Press.

The image also raised important ethical debates around care and representation. Ruby Hamad of the *Sydney Morning Herald* branded the photograph ‘war porn’ (2016: 18), criticizing both its sensational nature and ‘unfiltered’ depiction of human loss. The image was also met with speculation about whether it had been staged in order to accomplish a greater dramatic effect (Durham 2017). Alan Kurdi’s image also poses an important question about the role of ethics of representation and brings into focus the responsibility to report ‘human experience,

honestly, and with an overriding sense of responsibility' when documenting human tragedy (Newton 2012: x).<sup>1</sup>

In their research on ideological, policy and emotional responses to Alan Kurdi's image in Sweden, Sohlberg et al (2018: np), reflect on the impact of viewing such an image which 'is associated with the moral emotion of compassion.' They also draw parallels with another image having such an effect, that of the naked young nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc (also known as 'Napalm Girl') running up the road following a bombing attack during the Vietnam War (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: AP Photographer Nick Ut's image depicts children fleeing from a Napalm bombing during the Vietnam War. In the center of the frame running towards the camera is a naked 9-year-old girl, Phan Thị Kim Phúc. Source: Associated Press.

The image was taken by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, outside Trang Bang, approximately twenty-five miles northwest of Saigon on June 8, 1972 (TIME 2016). Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize winning photo became 'an icon of conflict photography' (TIME 2016: np) while also highlighting the horrors of war (van Schijndel 2019). The image also fuelled debates about authenticity, ethical issues of depicting nudity and the responsibility of photojournalism

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<sup>1</sup> My decision to include such an 'iconic' and 'problematic' image as part of my discussion and my encountered ethical dilemma is addressed in my *Methodology* chapter (p. 121).

when responding to human tragedy. A year after the image was published, America's involvement in the war ended. Sohlberg et al (2018: np) observe that images of this kind can contribute towards influencing public opinion while also achieving a temporary ideological shift through their ability to 'evoke moral emotions that briefly dominate ideology.' The 'figure of the child' (Castaneda 2002) therefore serves as the 'ultimate symbol of innocence and helplessness evoking compassion and pity' (Sohlberg et al 2018: np). As Burt and Strongman (2005) suggest, images that communicate the suffering of the vulnerable, call for action in support of those in need (see also Sohlberg et al 2018).

Through establishing a vulnerability-focused frame construction of those experiencing forced displacement, Alan Kurdi's image supported the temporary change from the 'migrant crisis' to the 'refugee crisis' in the UK press (Langdon 2019: 100). Alan's story briefly affected public engagement and political mobilization, as evidenced by political leaders across Europe committing to welcoming vulnerable populations (Sohlberg et al 2018). The image interrupted the depiction of the refugee crisis as a threat to fortress Europe and highlighted a social issue that could no longer be ignored (Ibrahim and Howarth 2016: 4; Langdon 2019). Moreover, the death of Alan Kurdi humanised the crisis as 'incoming migrants' became human and not just numbers mentioned in the media. According to Jha and Wani (2017: 47), 'it not only brought the focus on the dangerous lives, pathways and struggles for Asylum recognition, it also opened more space to the possibility that the refugee could have an identity, a name, a family, and a life history.'

Equally it resulted in a hyper-representation of 'refugees' as *helpless victims*, while also emphasising their vulnerability and contributing towards the racialization of the Syrian refugee crisis (Durham 2018). Such an emphasis on vulnerability is problematic as it reinforces dominant media representations of refugees as helpless, whereas choice seems to be absent within the asylum process, as any 'deserving' plea is judged against the lack of choice and inability of refugees to be in control of their lives. Moreover, Alan Kurdi's case highlights the discursive complexities of representing migration and draws attention to what Bauman refers to as 'refugee tragedy fatigue' (Bauman 2016: 2), as Kurdi's death was only a single incident of human loss despite the fact that more than 5000 individuals lost their lives in the sea during 2016:

Alan's picture also revealed the problematic nature of news media consumption; making one wonder whether we had to see such an extremely graphic and distressing image in order to acknowledge and react to a known and well-documented situation, or whether we have become so desensitised to images of human suffering and are trapped within a state of visual 'paralysis', which demands new levels of 'shock' in order to capture the public eye? (Stavropoulou 2016: np).

Yet, despite the mass circulation of images of individuals losing their lives during their life-threatening journeys across the Mediterranean, following an initial positive response across Europe (i.e. Refugees Welcome campaign, opening borders, governmental resettlement schemes), in the UK the 'Hostile Environment' continued and became increasingly more punitive through the introduction of new policies, increasingly stereotypical media documentation and political statements emphasising the need to 'protect our borders' throughout Brexit negotiations.

#### *Deserving, Talented and Successful*

In line with the deserving nature of the 'vulnerable' refugee, news media and refugee advocacy often promote stories of 'talented' and 'successful' asylum seekers who made an important contribution to the host nation (Judge 2010: 18). In the UK, such stories are prominently featured in national events such as Refugee Week, National City of Sanctuary as well across media publications and in academic research in an attempt to celebrate individual stories of success (Judge 2010: 18).

Another central narrative trope that serves as a 'counter stereotype' (Pupavac 2008) towards discursive representations of asylum seekers is that of prior qualifications and their engagement in worthy work (i.e. science, research, sports, cultural production, arts etc.). An example of the heroic, super-human 'refugee' can be found in the face of Syrian refugee and Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini who competed at the 2016 Olympic Games as part of a team of ten refugee Olympic athletes. The 'talented swimmer' came into the spotlight, when together with her sister she risked her life to help save nineteen people after the boat they were travelling on began to sink (Hopegood 2018). Her asylum-seeking experience is constructed as a story of success as reflected in the article's title (Figure 6), 'When my refugee boat sank, I swam to save lives- now I'm an Olympic swimmer.' The article's image positions Mardini sat in

the middle of an empty swimming pool which the image's caption reinforces her heroic actions: 'Yusra saved lives during the crossing from Turkey to Greece.' Mardini also shared her story through her autobiography *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian, My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph* (2018).



Figure 6: News article about refugee Yusra Mardini by British Newspaper The Mirror. Image via Reuters agency (2018).

The positive reception of Mardini's success story (leading to the publication of her autobiography) allows interesting reflections on the kind of 'extraordinary' personal stories of forced displacement that become heard - juxtaposed to the volume of 'normal' stories that remain unheard. Although such extraordinary stories succeed in humanizing the refugee crisis by drawing emphasis on 'our' shared humanity - as opposed to faceless statistics, such stories can also reinforce differentiation. In particular, accepting talent as a *prerequisite* for refugee deservingness can set in motion exclusionary processes between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' and 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' (Judge 2010; Pupavac 2008).

The image of the 'heroic', 'talented' and/or 'extraordinary' refugee may therefore serve as another facet of the notion of the 'deserving' refugee who is brought in such a position by external forces. The latter is not only worthy of protection but also serves as an 'investment'

through 'giving back' while also being expected to be grateful towards his or her host-country. There is an extensive body of work on critical theoretical interventions into charity and advocacy discourses and the ways in which 'sympathy themes' such as 'exceptional talent' may contribute towards reproducing the very social hostility they seek to challenge through reinforcing particular labels and in extension, expectations (Wroe 2013: 42). Such a risk of playing into the very dominant logic of what it means to be a 'deserving' refugee has been documented in global studies of humanitarian intervention such as Barbara Harell-Bonds' (1986) *Imposing Aid*, alongside migration scholars' work, such as Lisa Malkki's (1996) *Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization* (see also Wroe 2013: 42). Both texts offer critical reflections on the ways in which humanitarian projects may become complicit in dominant discourses and treatments which ultimately further marginalise refugee populations (Wroe: 2013: 42).

The idea of 'deserving refugees' has been a central focus of academic debates on refugee reception and discursive representations of forced displacement (Ravn et al. 2020). The notion of deservingness encompasses several dimensions starting with the legal definition of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which implies a legal right to state-funded assistance due to a person's need for humanitarian protection. The second dimension of deservingness derives from a 'meritocratic, capitalist perspective' that 'identifies the deserving with the active, potentially productive refugee/migrant' (Ravn et al. 2020S: np). Such a dimension responds to the notion of asylum seekers as a potential strain on welfare (Sales 2002) and therefore deserving asylum seekers are recognised as individuals who can become active social agents through benefiting their host communities.

Such an understanding of deservingness also draws attention to the problematic intersection of responsibility and hospitality and in particular the idea of expectations towards asylum seekers who have benefited from the 'life-changing opportunity' of asylum granting and are expected to be grateful (Judge 2010: 18; see Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018). As French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2000: 3) famously noted, hospitality is a word of 'a trouble and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it' – meaning hostility. Derrida captured the word's inherent duality through the term 'hostipitality' (Derrida 2000) in order to highlight how hospitality can never be absolute – instead it is inherent with the possibility of rejection and overt violence (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh 2018). As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2018: np) note, 'A neighbor can only welcome another

neighbor in a conditional way – to offer welcome is always already to have the power to delimit the space or place that is being offered to the Other'. In the context of asylum, the idea of 'hostipitality' lends itself to understanding how the reception of asylum seekers is defined by the limits of 'hospitality' as defined by specific parameters that draw the line between 'deserving/undeserving' and 'good/bad' refugees (i.e. vulnerability, nationality, educational levels, talent etc).

### *Threats and/or Invaders*

What happens, however, when the refugee figure departs from mainstream representations of victimhood and vulnerability? Research on young immigrant men, especially young Muslim men has identified how they are predominantly described using terms such as 'dangerous', 'threatening' and 'violent' (Archer 2003). Individuals seeking asylum are positioned as often occupying the role of the external invader that challenges national sovereignty and threatens their host country's physical, economic, social and cultural equilibrium (Gemi Ulasiuk and Triantafyllidou 2013; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017: 1751). The notion of 'threat' is linked to welfare access as people seeking asylum are *storied* as 'bogus' and 'opportunistic' individuals who are focused on depleting the welfare resources on the cost of the national community (Lynn and Lea 2003; Quinsaat 2014; my emphasis).

Examples of visual representations of asylum seekers as sexual predators can be seen as a response to the sexual assaults that took place across Germany, and especially Cologne on December 31<sup>st</sup> 2015. Media reports 'rushed' to confirm the identity of the perpetrators as newly arrived 'Middle Eastern/North African migrants and refugees' (Ibrahim 2017: np). Shortly after the events, individuals seeking asylum across Europe experienced a backlash of xenophobic attacks against their shelters, including arson attacks and physical injuries (The Telegraph 2016). Similar to Alan Kurdi's story, the Cologne events marked a milestone in the 'refugee crisis' debate while also triggering a 'wave' of xenophobia and contributing towards the racialization of the newly arrived communities (Ibrahim 2017).

The so-called 'Cologne Sex Attacks' refocused the 'refugee crisis' narrative crisis from 'Refugees Welcome' to 'Rapefugees Not Welcome' as shown in Figure 7 which shows the image of a sign during of the protests in Eastern German city Leipzig, blaming the sex assaults on migrants who had entered the country illegally and demanding their immediate deportation. The sign shows a woman being chased by three red male figures holding knives in their hands. The use of red

colour emphasises the image's central messages of sexual violence and the need to protect national security - also communicated by the phrase '*!STAY AWAY!*' which is highlighted through the use of exclamation marks and capital letters.



Figure 7: A sign with the words 'Rapefugees Not Welcome' during a public protest in Germany (2016). Sourced via Google Images.

Echoing the image of the criminal refugee trope, Figure 8 shows the cover of a Polish magazine which depicts a white female Europe being attacked by dark-skinned male attackers. The image serves as powerful symbolism as it re-masculinises the previously suffering refugee body and presents it as a threat to the feminized virgin European territories. In comparison to the figure of white Europe which is centrally positioned and visually accessible, the image only shows the arms of the 'attackers', further emphasizing a sentiment of blind invasion, while their positioning and gestures alludes to sexual acts as they attempt to 'rip off' Europe's clothing, further referring to acts of criminality, threat and invasion.



Figure 8: Cover of Polish magazine wSIECI featuring Europe being attacked by Muslim men. The title reads 'Islamic Rape of Europe' (2016).

In the UK in particular, the 'Cologne Sex Attacks' became a prominent point of discussion and political narratives prior to the UK European Union membership referendum vote in June 2016 (Ibrahim 2017). Leaders of the 'Leave Campaign' frequently employed the narratives of the attacks as a 'cautionary tale' of possible aftermaths if the UK were to remain in the UK. An example can be found in former UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader, Nigel Farage's reference to the attacks as part of his concerns over safety for women as a result of Britain's EU membership. 'The nuclear bomb this time would be about Cologne' he said, addressing the events in January, adding 'There are some very big cultural issues' (Elgot and Mason 2016).

Such concerns over 'cultural erosion' of 'national values' and security threats intensified over time leading towards the UK's decision to leave the EU.

According to a report prepared for the UNHCR - in conjunction with Cardiff University, out of the five European states' coverage of the 'refugee crisis', the UK had the 'most negative and polarised coverage of the crisis, often presenting the issues as a social or cultural threat.' (Langdon 2019: 95). The majority of the UK news media referred to the events as 'the migrant crisis.' As Langdon (2019: 97-98) notes, the use of the term 'migrant' suggests a sense of agency and control in one's decision-making process and although there are always choices to be made on an individual level, the purposeful and repeated use of such a 'term' trivializes the decision to flee one's country.

The construction of asylum seekers as a threat to the UK has been perpetuated by successive UK governments and has brought with it corresponding changes in policy and immigration control, proving Tyler's (2006: 192) point that 'figuring the asylum seeker as a threat works' (see Cohen 2002; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005). As Smith (2014: 45) observes, this threat is constructed in multiple ways including: national identity (Sirriyeh 2013); erosion of national values (Yuval-Davis et al 2005); economic resources (Sirriyeh 2013); as well as welfare provisions and employment opportunities (Düvell and Jordan and 2003). Such narratives contribute towards the delegitimation of asylum seekers supported by claims over the sincerity and lawfulness of such individuals (Ibrahim 2017).

The following two media photographs (see Figures 9 & 10) represent the interplay between co-constructed categories of the 'victim refugee' and the 'opportunistic bogus claimant'. Both images were widely circulated in various articles about migration flows towards the Greek islands of Chios and Lesbos during 2015. Figure 9 shows an overflowing boat that appears to be sinking, surrounded by volunteers and asylum seekers who have just arrived on the Greek island Lesbos' shore. The photograph was taken by Greek photojournalist Alkis Konstantinidis and was published by Reuters in 2015. In the centre of the image is a man wearing a blue lifeboat. He appears to address the spectator by looking directly into the camera. His body is half-immersed in water and his hands are empty, highlighting his experience of loss and visible suffering, against the background of people holding onto the lifeboat. The positioning of his body stands out; it could either be interpreted as the archetypal victim posture or a potential threat that has just arrived through water and is gazing straight into the public eye, waiting to

'attack'. Figure 9 is therefore defined by an ambiguous duality reminding us of the victim/threat dichotomy. In comparison to dominant visual representations of asylum seekers and refugees, we can see details and identify individuals' faces as the image focuses on a smaller group 'rather than faceless seas of bodies, with as a result, a greatly humanizing effect' (Lenette and Cleland 2016: 78).



Figure 9: Syrian and Afghan refugees are helped by locals and volunteers as they reach the shore of Greek island, Lesbos (2015). Source: Reuters.



Figure 10: A group of young Syrian men arriving to Greek Island, Lesbos (2015) Source: Sunday Express.

Figure 10 on the other hand, shows a group of notably *only* young men, some of whom are wearing sunglasses while posing for a selfie. If seen out of context this image could easily be mistaken for a summer holiday snap. In comparison to Figure 9, none of the young men are showing any visible signs of distress and all are wearing dry clothes. Most of them are holding their index and middle finger with their palm turned towards them, while others are facing their palm outwards and one person is offering a thumbs-up gesture. Such gestures may carry important connotations, as for example the first gesture may be an adaptation from Japanese practices signifying positivity, while the V sign historically associated with the 1960s anti-war movement, could also be understood as their personal recognition of victory in successfully reaching their destination. Equally such poses may be underpinned by popular cultural references while imitating music videos.

Apart from being a record of the visual vocabulary of the 'refugee crisis' these two images (Figures 9 & 10) also serve as an illustration of the tension between two different ways of *seeing* asylum seekers: First, as tragic, desperate victims in need of assistance and secondly, as opportunity-seeking economic migrants who are seizing the opportunity to infiltrate the UK. Kotilainen and Pellander (2017) make an interesting point in discussing the media's focus on refugees acquiring smartphones as such images disrupting politics of representation: 'The smartphone-using able bodied, active man, dressed in up-to-date Western style clothing, is, in many respects in stark opposition to the historical framing of refugees. It disrupts the ability to clearly differentiate 'us' from 'them'" (Kotilainen and Pellander 2017). Notably, the title of the article featuring Figure 10 communicates a sentiment of disbelief: 'Migrant crisis: Are these happy young men really timid souls fleeing war and persecution?' (Express 2015).

The act of posting a selfie is read as an example of vanity, where an idealized physical snapshot is shared with the aim of receiving attention and compliments. These associations contradict the widespread image of the refugee as highly distressed and only concerned with survival. Additionally, there are commercial associations with the selfie that similarly clash with predominant assumptions about refugees. In advertising, for instance, marketers deploy selfies to signal that one is young, fun, happy, and connected. This fundamentally conflicts with the mainstream image of the refugee as distressed, disconnected, and uprooted bodies-in-need. As Risam (2018: 58) writes, 'refugees taking selfies seem at odds with media representations circulating in the Global North where refugees are depicted as victims fleeing violence and in need of rescue.'

Figure 11 serves as an example of how a *different* representation of asylum seekers - one that does not conform to the idea of 'the refugee fleeing with only the bare necessities' (Literat 2017: np) was received by the public and re-interpreted through the creation of a meme. According to Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017: 1751), such conceptualising frames 'shift the focus of public attention towards the (il)legitimacy of asylum seekers' claims and the question whether they actually deserve sympathy and support' (see also Lynn and Lea 2003).



Figure 11: Meme of image of refugees taking a selfie as circulated via social media.

Figure 12 (below) serves as another example of how individuals can re-appropriate the meaning of an image in order to question the 'authenticity' of a claim for asylum. The role of social media in engaging in public discussions and re-appropriating meaning is important in understanding how individuals consume, reproduce and modify stories in accordance with their assumptions. During the timeframe 2015-2017, social media platforms allowed for a more immediate engagement with the 'refugee crisis' as evidenced in the case of Alan Kurdi which also provides insights into the way public stories become constructed, shared and received across different platforms.



Figure 12: Screenshot of Tweet in response to Daily Mail article, commenting on asylum seekers' use of a selfie stick (see Literat 2017: np).

As this section has outlined, the metaphorical construction of immigration is constituted of a web of interrelated, co-existing and alternating metaphors (Ponterotto 2000; Semino 2008; Castaño Castaño et al. 2017). Media representations do not merely serve as visual 'evidence' of the crisis, but most importantly hide symbolic power as they evoke particular ways of understanding forced displacement (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2018), resulting in the construction of what Bleiker, Campbell and Hutchison (2014: 192), describe as 'visual cultures of inhospitality.' As Ibrahim and Howarth (2014: 3) note,

while vision is defined as an instrumental function of the eye, visibility entails a social way of seeing and experiencing through the visual. When we speak of 'visibility' rather than vision, we are referring to the cultural meanings consolidated in and as images.

On a daily basis, we are faced with 'flows of messages and images' which constitute the 'basic thread of our social structure' (Castells 1996: 508). Photographic images are not merely pieces of visual evidence, they also serve as a means of representation; acquiring an active role in the meaning-making process, charged with ideological connotations and therefore serving as systems of signification (Barthes 1967). The power of photographic imagery rests in its capacity to function upon two levels simultaneously (Barthes 1977). The image's ideological meaning provides insight into the way society communicates what it thinks of the object through the use of genres, stereotypes and established narratives (Barthes 1997). The image is therefore involved in a process of signification by drawing upon a cultural 'lexicon of expressive features' which the reader/viewer then decodes (Hall 1973: 227). Such codes allow the reader to interpret a 'set of gesture, non-linguistic features...into a specific expressive configuration' (Hall 1973: 227). Seen within an existing ideological framework, a visual image represents and reinforces such dominant ideas. The image therefore becomes powerful, as it is able to 'transmit a powerful ideological message about a given situation, set of social conditions or series of events' (Greer 2003: 79). Thus, a camera is never neutral; instead visual representations are pre-charged with ideological norms (Banks 2012).

As shown through the selected visual examples, the story of the 'refugee crisis' has been told in highly racialised and gendered visual narratives ranging from newspaper cartoons, to images of drowned bodies and popular memes, among others. In a way, since July 2015 we've also experienced a visual 'crisis' of representation, confirming academic reservations about the practice of presenting individuals seeking asylum as either 'helpless victims' or 'threatening invaders'. My analysis of the visual culture of 2015's mass displacement 'crisis' has supported my understanding of how refugee subjectivities become othered in the public sphere and how such discourses influence perceptions of individuals seeking asylum.

The language of migration is inherently political for, as Turton (2003) observes, it is ultimately that of their potential hosts. Such a language is 'spoken from a sedentary, or state-centric perspective. It is the language *we* use to talk about *them*, even if *we*, or our ancestors, were also migrants once' (2003: 4 original emphasis). Furthermore, conceptualisations of forced displacement rest within a complex matrix of dominant narratives orchestrated by media, political and social structures. In this context, an arts-based approach recognises that the need for the representation of personal experiences of life in exile is imperative in order to raise

awareness and to advocate for a perception of refugee lives which facilitates a deeper understanding of their situation.

## 2.5 Arts-based Research

The second field within which this research is located is arts-based research (ABR). ABR is defined as a methodological genre that adopts creative practices throughout different stages of the research process (e.g. data production, evaluation, dissemination etc.) and is used across a vast array of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, psychology and education (Knowles and Cole 2008). Furthermore, arts-based research involves a range of artistic methods such as photography, filmmaking, digital storytelling, performance, creative writing, visual arts, and poetry, among others (Leavy 2017; Nunn 2017). There is extensive literature concerned with ABR as a field of inquiry (Barone and Eisner 2011; Finley 2008), and a range of methodological approaches including a/r/tography, arts-informed research, and arts inquiry (Knowles and Cole, 2008; McNiff 1998).

Arts-based methodologies can complement traditional qualitative methodologies as in comparison to social science methods that privilege language, arts-based methods might offer new channels to 'capture aesthetic, emotional, sensory and tacit experiences that cannot easily be expressed in words' (Jeffery et al 2019: 3; see also Gauntlett 2007; Eisner 2008; Bagnoli 2009). Within an interview setting, visual arts-based methods might better equip researchers to respond to participants' interpretations (Bagnoli 2009); whereas in focus group settings, visual arts-based methods may support more empathetic responses amongst participants than verbal or written communication alone (Guruge et al 2015).

There is an expanding body of research that engages in creative explorations with individuals seeking asylum including: drawing, painting and collage (Vacchelli 2018; Bagnoli 2009; Guruge et al. 2015; Stavropoulou 2019); photography, filmmaking and digital storytelling (Bachelet and Jeffery 2019; Haaken and O'Neill 2012; Lenette 2018; Lenette et al. 2019); performance arts (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008; O'Neill et al. 2018; Bachelet and Jeffery 2019); and walking (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; O'Neill and Perivolaris 2014; O'Neill et al. 2018).

The field of arts-based research has increasingly gained momentum and institutional recognition as a methodological approach that challenges textual and linguistic constraints and

supports creative meaning-making and representation (Nunn 2017: 44; Pink 2001; Pentassuglia 2017; Stavropoulou 2020). This is because art offers a multitude of ways of interpreting and experiencing the world (Finley 2008; Stavropoulou 2019: 97) and ‘can create a space to say things that can’t be said. In the arts, things can be surfaced that do not fall into familiar patterns.’ (Pahl et al 2018: 154).

As Pahl et al (2018: 154) observe, ‘art practice is a potential space. It is linked to a kind of unknowing, where the world stills and we think again, and reflect again, and out of nothing comes something.’ According to Nunn (2017: 5), a principal strength of art-based research is the ‘range of vocabularies’ it can offer as well as the support of diverse representations that can engage with the complexities of displacement. Arts-based research can therefore support the production of ‘multi-vocal, dialogic texts that allow for new interpretations of experiences’ (O’Neill and Hubbard 2010: 98). Furthermore, ABR allows synergies between artistic expression and epistemological processes. As Bell and Pahl (2017: 106) suggest, new epistemic paradigms that are invested in co-production can ‘tease out forms of knowledge extant within communities that are often overlooked or undervalued by more traditional forms of academic research.’

### *Participation, self-expression and co-production: opportunities and challenges*

According to O’Neill (2008) combining participatory research with creative means can shift the focus of knowledge production from what is “found” to what is ‘collaboratively made’ (O’Neill 2008 cited in Jeffery et al 2019: 7). Participation in creative projects can offer ‘the opportunity to review, revise, and reconstitute the often scattered shards of memory, culture and identity that [they] carry with them. The artistic may then become one of discovery’ (Ahmed 2011: 11). The notion of discovery is particularly relevant in the context of forced migration as such creative pathways can ‘provide avenues for migrants to meet and/or develop deep bonds with others, make themselves ‘present’ (...) and challenge the instrumental terms that categorize them’ (Jeffery et al 2019: 5). Additionally, creative means can support participants’ expressions of often difficult, emotionally-charged memories and allow the production of counter-narratives. As Lenette (2019: 149; original emphasis) suggests, an arts-based approach can ‘offer a haven to Knowledge Holders, not in terms of fully addressing the difficult realities that often remain beyond the aims of the inquiry but as **points of resistance** where meaningful and unique counter-narratives are created through storytelling.’

The ability of ABR to reach decision-making audiences through creative emotive cultural texts, makes it an ethically responsible research practice that supports knowledge dissemination and advocacy (Leavy 2009; Stavropoulou 2020). According to Cole and Knowles (2008: 62), 'the use of arts in research is not for art's sake. It is explicitly tied to moral purposes of social responsibility and epistemological equity.' The last decade has also shifted the focus on the implications and ethical dimensions of participation and co-production. An important ethical consideration of arts-based research is the blurring of power relationships between participants and researcher within the investigative process (Foster 2016: 2). It is important to note however that although participatory arts-based research offers a way to democratise research and challenge power imbalances those cannot be entirely eliminated, especially in relation to the presence and positionality of the researcher and their role in interpreting, selecting and disseminating data (Bachelet and Jeffery 2019). As Lykes (2010) describes, our own 'voice' as researchers might creep in, as in many cases the researcher might 'speak for' the research participants due to differences in ethnic, class, gender, educational, and linguistic background among others, which can create unequal power relationships.

Participation - and in particular the true extent of participation - poses an important ethical challenge for arts-based researchers as individuals who have experienced forced displacement may face additional cultural and/or language barriers that may not only lead to limited participation but also result in reinstating stereotypes which depict individuals seeking asylum as helpless victims with limited agency and 'tragic' histories of suffering and loss, failing to recognise them as able agents (Eastmond 2007). Equally, it is important to ensure that participation is ongoing and supported throughout a project: from identifying the key issues, to shaping and implementing participatory methods, to collective analysis and co-creation of the research as well as dissemination of creative and research outputs (Jeffery et al 2019: 7; Bergold and Thomas 2012: 6-10).

Drawing from their reflections on their arts-based research encounters in Morocco as part of their *Arts for Advocacy* interdisciplinary project, Bachelet and Jeffery (2019: 32) note that 'to participate (to take part) does not necessarily imply equal participation in decision-making processes' as in many cases the final selection and curatorial input might be determined by the artists. Another important insight from Bachelet and Jeffery's ethnographic observations is that participation is not a given: researchers must remain reflective and transparent regarding

decision-making and make efforts to ensure that participants will benefit from such an experience (skill acquisition) and that their time and travel will be adequately reimbursed.

As Keifer-Boyd (2011) suggests, 'a social justice approach to arts-based research involves continual critical reflexivity in response to injustice' (2011: 3). Such a reflexivity seeks to identify, highlight and challenge structural and symbolic injustice. Arts-based approaches can therefore support enactments of cultural citizenship (see Pakulski, 1977) - defined as 'the right to presence and visibility, not marginalization; the right to dignity and maintenance of lifestyle - not assimilation to the dominant culture; and the right to dignifying representation- not stigmatisation' (O'Neill 2018: 74). Through arts-based research individuals can share stories that challenge mainstream conceptualisations and affirm their views and place within their changing social realities (Stavropoulou 2020).

However, as Greatrick and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2017) highlight a meaningful and ethical engagement with experiences and stories of forced displacement involves the creation of a space in which research participants can express themselves freely from imposed expectations of the 'vulnerable/violent/bogus/grateful refugee - but also from the very expectation that participants will (or should) be performing in an 'authentic' way and 'revealing' their 'true self' during workshops' (2017: np; Stavropoulou 2020: 713).

My research responds to and demonstrates the transformative potential of arts-based research in participants' lives through supporting meaningful participation in the knowledge production process. In adopting an arts-based approach, it co-creates with participants a creative space where participants are empowered by sharing stories that address, challenge, subvert and reimagine what it feels like to be an asylum seeker. The produced visual stories should not be understood as merely illustrations of lived experiences but as democratic statements that accomplish social critique (Stavropoulou 2019: 97). The images therefore serve as platforms of self-expression through the 'immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote and effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge' (Wang and Burris 1997: 369).

## 2.6. Conclusion

Central to this chapter is an investigation of the dominant narratives about asylum seekers and refugees and the meaning-making and conceptualising processes they support. It is important to understand the ways in which individuals seeking asylum become characterised and defined, as such labels not only influence public attitudes and opinions but more importantly, may inform the ways in which individuals seeking asylum re-claim their place within their social realities and the reasons why they might experience stigmatisation, social alienation and hostility. Moreover, through understanding the impact of dominant narratives of 'helpless victim' and/or 'potential threat', we can better engage with the complexities of exilic experiences and understand the expectations and principal stories to which personal stories of force displacement respond, reproduce and challenge.

As demonstrated in this chapter, participatory arts-based research may serve as a powerful tool for examining migratory experiences through its inherently political potential for resisting invisibility (Stavropoulou 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to remain critical as "Arts as a vehicle for social change' when loosely bandied about remains simply an empty signifier; an empty slogan.' (Counterpoints Arts 2018: np). An ethical engagement with arts-based research processes requires continuous reflexivity and care towards participants to ensure that their participation is meaningful. The next chapter on methodologies presents this study's ethno-mimetic design, outlining the potential of such methods as a resource for listening while highlighting the need for 'ethical conversations' between researcher and research participants (te Riele and Baker 2016).

## Chapter Three: My Methodological Journey

Symbols include words and many objects,  
and almost all acts around others contain a symbolic element.  
Words are the most important symbols, making human thinking possible.

**Joel M. Charon (2007: 58)**

As we have seen, every act of storytelling involves:  
a *teller* with something to tell (a story), to *someone* (a listener),  
about *something* (real or imaginary).

**Maria Duffy (2009: 30)**

### 3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter provides an overview of this study's methodology and the practical, ethical, and conceptual challenges I encountered during my investigation. I will begin by introducing my epistemological positioning and the key conceptual tools that have supported my ethno-mimetic methodological and conceptual approach. I will proceed with outlining my narrative approach to examining experiences of forced displacement, while also reflecting on my own story and positionality as a female researcher. I will then explain the relevance of my symbolic interactionism framework in analysing participants' self-representations and their storytelling practices before proceeding to presenting my ethno-mimetic approach by describing the four key stages of data collection and explain the relationship between biographical research and creative re-presentation (O'Neill 2012; 2017). I will then outline my experience of developing relationships with gatekeepers as well as participants. Finally, I will address issues around consent, anonymity, privacy as well as ethical and emotional challenges that defined and shaped my research experience.

### 3.2 Epistemological Positioning: Ethno-Mimesis & Telling Stories

A key aim in my participatory arts-based study is to understand the kinds of stories that individuals seeking asylum share and the reasons why they present them as such. Over a period of 18 months, I engaged with the kinds of stories participants shared at different research stages (i.e. interviews, workshops) and across a range of mediums and platforms (visual, oral,

textual, images, social media and coffee meetings). In combining arts-based methods (mimesis) with personal narratives (ethnography), my study instigated a process of ethno-mimesis as defined by O'Neill (1999), understood as the dialogical 'potential space' that emerges through combining 'the inter-textuality of biography/narrative (ethnography) and art (mimesis)' (O'Neill 2008: np)<sup>2</sup>.

The concept of ethno-mimesis was developed and explored by O'Neill (1999) throughout her thirty-year research trajectory, as a methodological process and practice that bridges ethnographic work and creative art processes, drawing upon the work of Adorno (1984; 1987) and Benjamin (1985) on mimesis and the relationship between art and society (O'Neill 2018: 78).<sup>3</sup> The hyphen within the term 'ethno-mimesis', serves as an 'in-between space' between the two terms as well as an important space between the two disciplines. In my own methodological journey, the notion of 'in-between space' operates on two levels. First, it has allowed me to combine my two identities as a researcher and a community artist in order to combine my creative and analytical skills when engaging with participants lived, imagined and narrated realities. Secondly, such an in-between space allows me to observe participants realities (ethnography) while also interrogating the ways in which they creatively re-interpret such realities (mimesis). In exploring such a space, I am therefore interested in the way individuals re-enact and re-present social circumstances while negotiating their sense of selfhood and relationship with their lived realities.

My ethno-mimetic approach is underpinned by a participatory action research (PAR) focus which highlights the importance of conducting research with participants and co-researchers (i.e. community), whose world-view, actions and interpretations are under study (Bergold and Thomas 2012: np; Kindon et al 2007; Pain et al 2011). According to O'Neill (2012: 157 original emphasis), 'PAR is transformative and it is also rigorous and ethical. PAR is a process directed towards social change *with* the participants. It is interventionist, action-orientated and

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<sup>2</sup> In her paper *Transnational Refugees: The Transformative Role of Art?*, O'Neill (2008), draws upon Benjamin's (1992) work *The Storyteller* to further discuss the methodological contribution of combining biography/narrative with art forms (ethno-mimesis) in creating such a 'potential', reflective/safe space for dialogue and narratives to emerge around the themes of transnational identities, home and belonging (O'Neill 2008).

<sup>3</sup> O'Neill came to use the mimesis through her engagement with critical theory, Western Marxism and especially the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. While completing her doctoral thesis on Adorno's aesthetics of modernism she also conducted her first empirical ethnographic study of prostitution (1984-1989). Interested in the transformative power of art since her undergraduate degree she conceived of the term 'ethno-mimesis' in order to explore her work on Benjamin and Adorno's use of mimesis (Hegelian impulse in Aesthetic Theory) alongside the ethnographic, biographical research she was undertaking (O'Neill 2008).

interpretive.’ As O’Neill further notes, PAR offers possibilities for transformation at each change of the research process. For example, when conducting interview with participants such a process can validate and reinforce their worldviews and in the process of inclusion of individuals as co-researchers such a validation is ‘transformed into constructive and creative responses for themselves and their communities’ (O’Neill 2012: 157).

PAR has been defined as ‘philosophical approach to research that recognizes the needs for persons being studied to participate in the design and conduct of all phases (e.g. design, execution, and dissemination) of any research that affects them’ (Vollman et al 2004: 129). Founded on principles of inclusion and participation, the purpose of PAR is to foster capacity, community development, empowerment, access, social justice and participation (Vollman et al 2004). Wadsworth (1998) further extended the definition of PAR by including the acknowledgement of historical, political, economic and geographic contexts in order to make better sense of issues that require systematic change. In PAR, participants are ‘actively engaging in the quest for information and ideas to guide their future actions’ (Whyte 1991: 20).

Despite not defining my PhD as PAR, I do embrace its values and overall *emancipatory orientation* towards the research participants. This involves encouraging people with lived experience of the issues being studied to take ownership of the research process and meaningfully participate in the production of learning outcomes that can improve their living conditions and/or stimulate other kinds of social change (Amaya and Yeates 2014: 3). As such PAR promotes problem solving, both intellectual and practical (David 2001: 12). Although ‘action’ was not an explicit objective of my study, my research had a positive impact in so far as participants’ lives became transformed through their involvement in the research project. Such involvement extended beyond the action of sharing important stories about themselves in front of new audiences; more importantly it invited new ways of representation through re-focusing their storytelling skills in a new identity, that of an individual seeking asylum. As Pain and Francis (2003: 46) note, participatory approaches ‘did not originate as a methodology for research, but as process by which communities can work towards change.’ In my project’s research community (defining community as research participants sharing the background of seeking asylum), change occurred through their own decision to share their stories and to employ those stories as means to influence, inform, and respond to particular expectations around their new identities.

An example of how participants developed their skills can be seen in the case of Lina's experience of attending the annual *Sanctuary in Parliament* event in November 2017. *Sanctuary in Parliament* is an annual event organised by *City of Sanctuary* (CoS)<sup>4</sup>, involving *City of Sanctuary* community groups from around the UK and MPs in order to discuss key issues faced by people seeking asylum such as the right to work. Prior to attending the event, Lina had also been approached by *City of Sanctuary* in order to produce a blog piece for their website, about her experiences as a disabled young woman, outlining some of the key issues she was facing. I had the opportunity to work with Lina towards preparing the blog piece in collaboration with the CoS key media and PR staff member, as well as rehearsing her speech for the *Sanctuary in Parliament* event. It was truly powerful to see how Lina shared her story in order to advocate for change and additional support for women asylum seekers. A few months later, Lina messaged me to let me know that one of the MP's who had attended the event, Layla Moran, mentioned some of the information that Lina had shared, as part of her speech in a debate in Westminster Hall. Layla Moran's speech highlighted the issue of period poverty and the need to provide sanitary products for people regarded as very vulnerable, including women asylum seekers. Lina was really proud for having been in a position to share her life experiences and as a result to inform political action.

As David (2001: 11) suggests, PAR's commitment to involve participants, does become a form of 'advocacy' which is similar to the way I also understand my research approach as a form of advocacy that supports and carefully listens to vocal acts of self-representation. Such a commitment to advocacy has supported my choice of ethno-mimesis as a conceptual framework that encourages participation, self-expression and personal empowerment. Combining ethno-mimesis and PAR when conducting participatory research with individuals and communities promotes purposeful knowledge that may challenge, oppose and overturn stereotypical ways of understanding, 'knowing' and describing social phenomena. According to O'Neill and Haridranath (2006: 49)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *City of Sanctuary* a national charity supporting a network of community-led groups across the UK and Ireland who are part of a movement to build and support a culture of welcome and hospitality. For more information visit <https://cityofsanctuary.org/>

<sup>5</sup> In their 2006 co-authored article, O'Neill and Haridranath offer an in-depth discussion of the transformative role and capacity of art and the importance of biographical research in relation to ethno-mimesis as critical theory in practice/praxis. O'Neill's ethno-mimetic approach focuses on the importance of renewing methodologies through interdisciplinarity in order to better understand social issues such migration and lived experiences of arrival as well as to facilitate the production of new knowledge that counters hegemonic texts in order to counter 'exclusionary processes' and offer 'representational challenges as part of a counter formulation and potentially radical cultural imaginary' (Bromley 2000: 20).

PAR as ethno-mimesis is both a practice and a process aimed at illuminating inequalities and injustice through socio-cultural research and analysis. In addition, it seeks to envision and imagine a better future based upon a dialectic of mutual recognition, ethical communication, respect for human rights, cultural citizenship and democratic participatory processes.

Ethno-mimesis is therefore invested in the possibility of art to 'imagine what is possible' (hooks, 2000) and can therefore serve as a powerful tool to 'excavate the recurrent patterns of inequity and oppression, as well as the acts of transformation and activism' (Villaverdi 2008: 123). As O'Neill (2008: np) notes, 'Art makes visible experiences, hopes, ideas; it is a reflective space and socially it brings something new into the world - it contributes to knowledge and understanding.' By adopting a conceptual framework drawing on critical theory combined with praxis - understood as purposeful knowledge (O'Neill 2008, 2010) - this research insists that participants' stories (verbal, textual, visual) should not be understood as merely illustrative but as democratic statements that accomplish social critique. According to O'Neill and Harindranath (2006: 42-43), 'biographical research counters the sanitized, demonized or hidden aspects of the lived cultures of exile and belonging...In doing so biography research helps to produce knowledge as a form of social justice.'

In employing ethno-mimesis as a conceptual and methodological approach, I have engaged with participants' stories, as well as reflected on the impact of re-imagining such stories through artistic methods in relation to meaning-making, representation, and their political role in promoting social justice. Adopting an ethno-mimetic approach offered me opportunities to gain insight into participants' lives - both through their stories and creative methods. As O'Neill (2002: 79) argues, it is through the employment of participatory methods, that 'we are able to get in touch with our 'realities', our social worlds and the lived experiences of others, in ways which demand critical reflection.' Ethno-mimesis can therefore provide 'tools for creating new ways of seeing and for identifying motifs that subvert stereotypical scripts' (Haaken and O'Neill 2014: 84).

### 3.2.1 A Narrative Approach to Engaging with Stories of Forced Displacement

Meaning and representation often occur as a result of processes of narration. Individuals therefore represent themselves and human experience through narrative production. Bruner (1987) suggests that we organize our everyday interpretations of the world, of social situations and social interactions through the use of narrative stories and in doing so we construct and make sense of our reality. As Jenkins (2013: 140) notes, 'We live in a storied world. We live our lives through the creation and exchange of narratives.'

Following the 'narrative turn' in humanities, we have witnessed a proliferating interest in narrative research across several disciplines, as well as a surge in employment of narrative-based methods (Barusch 2012). Such a shift has also been supported by a growing body of research on 'how and why we might do narrative research' (Woodiwiss 2017: 13; Gubrium and Holstein 1999; Plummer 2000; Plummer 2006; Riessman 2005; 2008; Roberts 2002). The return to narrative as an approach across disciplines is relatively recent, dating to the 1970s when historian Hayden White argued that historians do not write history, but instead rewrite it (White 1973). In a similar vein, Richard Harvey Brown introduced the idea of a 'poetics for sociology' (1989), whereas Walter R. Fisher pointed out the importance of narrative in politics; additionally, sociologist Laurel Richardson (1990) explored the role of stories as 'sociological texts', emphasising the social construction of this form of knowledge (See Woodiwiss 2017).

Narrative research builds on a canon of sociological thought that supports the understanding that 'culture may be viewed as stories, that the social world is a text, that society is a discourse or that lives are narratives' (Plummer 1995: 105). Such analytical frameworks are informed by deconstructionist approaches, which oppose 'rational' and linear narrative structures and instead emphasize polyphony (Bakhtin 1990). Narrative production should not be understood as a finalised sequence of ordered life events, instead it should be understood as an ongoing process that is open for interpretation and reflexivity (Boje 2008).

Ochs and Capps (1996: 19) define narrative as 'framings of a sequence of actual or possible events.' Chase's (2011) definition captures the processes and implications of such a conceptualization of narrative: '(...) meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or other's actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and

events over time' (2011: 421). The act of narration thus moves beyond the process of structuring scattered events into a meaningful and ordered form; it also allows individuals to acquire a sense of continuity and unison (Ricoeur 1991; Bruner 1987; 2001). As Eastmond (2007: 250) observes, 'Put simply, narrative is a form in which activities and events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order, imposing on reality a unity which it does not inherently possess.' It allows one to grasp the meaning and intentionality of one's actions: by constantly reviewing one's life-stories, one is able to perform teleological actions and to establish a succession of events (Bruner 2001).

In his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984-88), Ricoeur offers a complex and in-depth analysis of the interconnection between narrative discourse and human experiences (Venema 2000: 238). According to Ricoeur, narrative function is 'the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed and at the limit mute temporal experience' (1984: xi). For Ricoeur (1984: 74):

this narrative interpretation implies that a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity. It is the quest for this personal identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for.

Life-narratives function as 'creative constructions or interpretation of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present' (Eastmond 2007: np). They also serve as bridges between one's past, present, and future, as well as creating spaces for potential new events and possible 'imaginable worlds' to emerge (Ochs and Capps 1996). Moreover, they allow individuals to construct a meaningful narrative account of who they are in relation to themselves and others (Ricoeur 1984).

When individuals reveal something of their personal experience they do not simply recount facts, but narrate a lived experience in 'storied form' (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). As Bruner (1987) points out, the relationship between telling and living is complex and needs to be distinguished between '*life as lived*, the flow of events that touch on a person's life; *life as experienced*, how the person perceives and ascribes meaning to what happens, drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; and *life as told*, how experience is framed and

articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience' (Eastmond 2007: 248 - 249; Bruner 1987). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue, drawing from Bruner's (2004) understanding of 'life as narrative', we 'lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives' (1990: 2). We understand our lives, come to know others and make sense of our experiences through the stories we tell (Bruner 2001). As Eastmond (2007: 251) argues, stories have an important role to play in documenting life experiences, dealing with trauma, as well as envisaging solutions:

Stories are reconstitutive in the way they organize experience, give it unity and meaning, but they also, in a more pragmatic perspective, form part of purposive and meaningful action to influence the outcome. Story-telling in itself, as a way for individuals and communities to remember, bear witness, or seek to restore continuity and identity, can be a symbolic resource enlisted to alleviate suffering and change their situation.

As a response to the need for research that adopts a 'refugee-centred perspective' (Voutira and Dona 2007: 166), narrative methods - and in particular life stories, are of the more established qualitative methodologies, due to their role in highlighting individual meaning-making and offering individuals the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. As Eastmond (2007: 248) notes:

In the field of forced migration, narratives have also been important to researchers, not seldom relied upon as the only means we have of knowing something about life in times and places to which we have little other access. With the more interpretive approach, narratives have become interesting also for what they can tell us about how people themselves, as 'experiencing subjects', make sense of violence and turbulent change.

Listening to life stories facilitates understandings on how individuals interpret their lives within social and cultural contexts, allowing us to understand the 'subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system' (Behar 1990: 225) as well as the meaning that individuals ascribe to their experiences and social settings (Roberts 2002: 5). Engaging with life stories also invites research that is,

Oriented to comprehend the refugee events and experiences in their polymorphism, in their complexity, by posing the question of the refugee from the standpoint of the ways in which displaced people, the refugees themselves, labour to constitute and define their experiences of displacement.....[T]his attitude affords a space for the refugees by listening to a plethora of refugee voices (Soguk 1999: 4-5).

My interest in understanding and employing narrative as a methodology as well as an epistemological framework, focuses on the kind of stories that individuals seeking asylum are able to tell, the conditions in which these narrative expressions emerge and finally the way in which participants engage in processes of production of the self, through the kind of stories that they share about their themselves. It is equally important to remember that the stories participants share, are neither 'false' or 'true' - instead they should be understood as subjective accounts told in particular moments in time and for different reasons (Woodiwiss 2017: 14). The stories that people tell can therefore only be partial and need to be understood as products of other factors such as real and imagined audiences, social and cultural contexts, power hierarchies and social locations as well as perceived meanings and expectations, impacting their production (Bruner 1987; Plummer 1995). The following section will now introduce the theoretical concept of symbolic interactionism which foregrounds my analysis and allows me to understand how participants share particular stories that respond or challenge legal and cultural expectations of what a 'refugee' is.

### 3.2.2 Symbolic Interactionism as A Tool for Analysis

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework that examines how society is created and sustained through ongoing interactions among social agents (Carter and Fuller 2015: 1). As Schenk and Holman (1980) argue, symbolic interaction is a dynamic theory that addresses how objects acquire meanings and how individuals behave in relation to the meaning they attribute to objects around them. The theory was shaped by the work of theorists such as Cooley (1902), Parks (1915), Mead (1934; 1938) and Blumer (1969), amongst others. Central to symbolic interactionism is the acknowledgement that individuals use language and symbols in order to communicate with others. Language is therefore an essential process of human relations as well

as the primary social foundation of the self. For sociologist George Herbert Mead, whose work focused on the relationship between a self and others; the self was understood as a social emergent, created through social interaction. As he explained:

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individuals as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process (Mead 1934: 153).

According to Mead, the social emergence of the self is possible through the elucidation of the three forms of inter-subjective activity: language, play, and the game. These three forms are the basic social processes that support the reflexive objectification of the self, given that the self 'can enter as an object [to himself] only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of his experiential transactions with other individuals in an organised social environment' (Mead 1934: 225). The self-as-object should be understood as a basic structural process of human experience that arises in response to other individuals within a social-symbolic world of internal and inter-subjective relations. The individual's response to the social world is therefore active, as she or he decides what they will do as a response to others. Mead distinguishes between the 'me' and the 'I'. As he explains, the 'me' is the social self, whereas the 'I' is a response to the 'me' (Mead 1934: 178). As Mead explains: 'The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of others; the 'me' is the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes' (ibid: 178).

There is therefore a dialectic relationship between society and the individual, a relationship which is enacted within the polarity of the 'me' and the 'I'. The objectification of the 'I' is only possible through an awareness of one's past and will appear as a symbolised object in one's understanding of past actions, when it has already become part of the 'me.' The 'me' can be understood as the phase of the self that represents the past. The 'I' - being a response to the 'me', represents action in a present and suggests the restructuring of the 'me' in a future (ibid: 203- 204).

The dialectic relationship between social environments and individuals is particularly useful in my work as it better equips me to analyse participants' storytelling practices as socially-situated exchanges responding towards particular symbols and constructed meanings such as

notions of 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees.' When analyzing experiences of forced displacement, it is important to remember that the storied process of such experiences become shaped by dominant narratives, classification mechanisms, and language.

Mead's formulation assumes that symbols are used as a means of communication (Ashworth 2000). In particular, he examined how people interacted with one another through symbolic interaction and how they created meaning (Korgen and White 2008). Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, extended Mead's hypothesis as well as formally introducing the term 'symbolic interaction.' According to Blumer (1969), meaning is attributed to objects, events and social phenomena by individuals. Blumer conceptualises symbolic interaction in the following way:

The term 'symbolic interaction' refers, of course, to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. (1995: 263).

There are three central propositions foregrounding Blumer's theoretical framework: First, individuals act towards things on the basis of the meaning that they ascribe; Second, the meaning of things arises from the social interaction that one individual has with others; Third, these meanings are processed and modified through an interpretive process by the person in response to others.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals make meaning through their own unique points of view. According to Carter and Fuller (2015: 3; original emphasis), 'Symbolic interactionists are often less concerned with objective *structure* than with subjective *meaning* - how recreated, meaningful interactions among individuals come to define the makeup of 'society.' As Blumer suggests, meanings are understood to be the result of a dialogue with one's self. When confronted with a particular symbol, the individual formulates a particular response in relation to the meaning he has ascribed to it.

Another important theorist who further advanced and engaged with the symbolic interaction approach to understand human interaction in social environments was Erving Goffman. Goffman's approach, known as dramaturgy or dramaturgical theory, employed the use of theatre and drama as a metaphor to explain how individuals present themselves in social environments through active impression management. Impression management refers to the verbal and nonverbal practices individuals employ in an attempt to present a particular image of themselves to others (Peeters and Lievens 2006). In contrast to Mead and Blumer who explored the internal conversations that individuals engage in as they prepare to act, Goffman was more interested in how social arrangements and the co-presence of individuals impacts upon the organisation and, by extension, the presentation of the self. In commenting on Mead's work, Goffman argues:

The Meadian notion that the individual takes toward himself the attitude others take toward him seems very much an oversimplification. Rather the individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts. Each individual is responsible for the demeanor image of himself and the deference image of others, so that for a complete man to be expressed, individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left (1967: 84, 85).

Extending Mead's work on the way in which individuals construct a particular image of themselves, Goffman introduces the notion of a stage, and distinguishes between front and back stage. The front stage is a social space where face-to-face encounters are accomplished and where the individual manages impressions and performs in particular ways in order to create specific impressions in the minds of others. The front is defined by Goffman (1959: 22) as 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. On the contrary, the back stage is where 'the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines, and step out of character' (Goffman 1959: 115). Goffman's separation between the front and back stage should not be misinterpreted as individuals 'lying' about who they truly are. Instead, the focus

should remain on how individuals interpret particular symbols and how they engage in impression management in front of particular audiences and settings.

Appreciation of meaning-acquisition through symbolic interaction is of particular interest in understanding the practice of storytelling within the asylum process and how individuals negotiate such experiences in an attempt to construct a particular identity, that of the 'good refugee through engaging in *story management*. Stories of individuals seeking asylum are situated and juxtaposed against particular legal criteria and are therefore required to be *told* in a particular way (Bruner 2004). During the process of seeking asylum, individuals are required to present their 'asylum story' in front of a decision-making audience who will then determine the credibility of one's story according to particular criteria (Burki 2015: 6). As Jeffers (2011: 17) argues, during the asylum determination process asylum seekers must construct a particular refugee identity which 'conform[s] to cultural expectations of refugees, particularly in relation to suffering.' In order to adequately understand how individuals attach meaning to their experiences of force displacement it is important to first engage with the different intersected identity frames that influence such meaning-making processes. In the following section I will introduce the notion of intersectionality and outline my intersectional approach as stated in my *Introduction*.

### 3.3 The Need for an Intersectional Lens

The concept of intersectionality has served as an important tool in engaging and analysing participant stories. The concept was first introduced by American feminist legal scholar and civil rights advocate, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991) as a theoretical framework to describe the exclusion of Black women from White feminist discourse, in an attempt to adequately understand systemic injustice and social inequality. Intersectionality argues that in order to understand human beings, we need to take into consideration different particularities including: race, class, sexuality, gender and ethnicity, as interwoven in a 'interlocking systems of privilege and oppression' (Bowleg 2012: 1267-68). As Squires (2008: 55) argues:

Theories of intersectionality hold that discrete forms of oppression shape, and are shaped by, one another, and a failure to recognise this results in both simplistic analyses and ill-conceived policy interventions. This approach still retains a notion of structural inequality and operates with groups as the

subjects of equality policies rather than individuals, but is attentive to the cross-cutting nature of structures of oppression and the overlapping nature of groups.

Intersectionality thus serves as a powerful conceptual tool supporting our better understanding of social divisions by 'seeing them as intersecting roads' (Yuval-Davis 2011). Furthermore, it allows us to understand that a person's place in society 'is formed by the intersection of social constructions that mark privilege and oppression' (Murphy et al. 2009: 7), and to overcome the limitations of an essentialist position that understands all members of a particular social group as the same (Hankivsky et al 2011). An example of the need to support an intersectional understanding of identity markers is offered by Bastia (2014) who presents the case of black women having to decide under which category they need protection: gender or race, when applying for equality legislation (2015: 8). Paying attention to conflicting elements of the position of social agents is particularly useful in examining experiences of forced displacement, as it offers an understanding of the variety of privileges and/or forms of oppression that research participants have experienced while seeking asylum in the UK. This is accomplished by understanding how such experiences are shaped by their backgrounds, family histories, and particular identity aspects.

Despite serving as a conceptual framework for understanding different experiences of seeking asylum, there are also weaknesses with intersectionality as an approach. In particular, McCall (2005) and Nash (2008) have critiqued intersectionality on the basis that it continues to rely on 'binary identities to explain multiple forms of discrimination' (Nash 2008 : 9). Another limitation of intersectionality is the issue of scale in terms of *who* is recognised as being intersectional (Nash 2008: 9). Most scholarship focuses on the intersectional identities of marginalised groups although some have argued that it also serves as a powerful conceptualisation of the concept of identity (Zack 2005). According to Nash (2008), 'progressive scholarship requires a nuanced conception of identity that recognises the ways in which positions of dominance and subordination work in complex and intersecting ways to constitute subjects' experiences of personhood' (Nash 2008: 10). As Lenette and Boddy (2013: 74) remind us, 'it is the researcher's role to interpret experiences of intersectionality by making the implicit explicit' (see also Bowleg 2008). Intersectionality can serve as a useful analytical tool to better support researchers' understanding of the complexity of exilic experiences and the interconnected nature of issues faced by individuals (Lenette and Boddy 2013: 74).

In the last decade, intersectionality has been employed in a rising number of migration studies (Anthias 2012; Lenette and Boddy 2013). For example, Riaño (2011) conducted a participatory action research study with skilled women migrants in Switzerland examining barriers to skilled employment access. Riaño outlined how female participants' married status, combined with their immigration status determined their accessibility to employment opportunities demonstrated by the fact that a highly skilled migrant failed to find a job whereas a young single mother who had acquired refugee status was offered free training and childcare and was eventually able to find a job.

In my research, an intersectional approach supports my understanding of the compound effect of interconnected factors such as gender, age, socio-economic status, sexuality, religion, and education, among others. Intersectionality has been particularly helpful in examining the different positions of oppression and discrimination as experienced by participants while negotiating their new identities as 'asylum seekers/refugees'. As shown through my analysis, participants' intersectional identities have shaped their asylum-seeking journeys in different ways and at different stages: starting with the reasons for and conditions of their journeys (*Chapter 4*) to the UK and extending to their understanding of the 'success' of their asylum claims and how those were dependent on their nationality, gender and sexuality (*Chapter 5*). Additionally, individuals' narrated experiences of stigmatisation and 'welcoming' by host communities also differed in relation to different factors such as their race and ethnicity, as well as their gender (*Chapter 6*).

Ultimately, by examining participants' diverse identifications I have been able to understand in a more nuanced way their experiences of belonging and the ways in which they interpret and negotiate such identifications (i.e. disability and gender). As such, an intersectional approach has supported my understanding of belonging as a process in which individuals are able to 'weave their collective identities out of multiple affiliations and positions and link their cross-cutting belongingness with complex attachments and multiple alliances' (Caglar in Vertovec 2001: 580; Muller 2018). As outlined in my *Introduction*, when engaging with narrated experiences of forced displacement it is important to remember that participants are historically-situated social beings living in particular social, geographical, historical and cultural spaces. Thinking about intersectionality in relation to identity, allows me to recognise the particularities of each participant's background, hence resisting the assumption of a

universal and collective 'refugee experience' through examining how individual experiences affect and shape each person's asylum-seeking trajectory.

As these two sections (3.2 & 3.3) have outlined, my epistemological framework of biographical/narrative research and participatory arts-based research encompasses a range of methodological and analytical approaches including ethno-mimesis, symbolic interactionism and intersectionality. An ethno-mimetic approach combined with biographical research methods has supported my engagement with participants' lived and narrated experiences (ethno) while also supporting their creative representation of such experiences through creative art forms (mimesis). Adopting a symbolic interactionist lens has allowed me to further develop the concept of ethno-mimesis by focusing on the interactions between social actors through the use of storytelling and visual methods. Such an approach has allowed me to examine how participants interpret their new identities and how they interpret their new identities and how they respond to expectations and dominant beliefs towards them. My analysis is also underpinned by an intersectionality frame, further enhancing my understanding of individuals' different intersected identities and how these shape their experiences, their stories as well as their process of self-representation. Having mapped my theoretical and analytical frameworks, I will now move on and introduce my study's different stages and most importantly introduce the participants whose stories, interests and experiences have shaped my methodology.

### **3.4 Involved Organisations and Projects<sup>6</sup>**

Thanks to my four-year professional experience as a community artist and workshop leader, I was aware of the importance of investing time and effort in establishing rapport with gate keepers before being able to access particular groups and communities. I therefore began identifying local arts and advocacy organisations as well as service providers in Stockton and Newcastle, early in my first year of research (approximately during months: 5-10), in order to allow myself adequate time to approach and establish relationships with as many organisations as possible. I contacted a total of twenty organisations and met with ten organisations and

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<sup>6</sup> Names of organisations have been modified for anonymity apart from the 'Home and Belonging Project' as I have obtained email confirmation from project lead granting her consent for material to be used and for the project to be identified.

community groups, managing to build long-term relationships with a total of four organisations that served as points of first of first contact with most participants.

#### *Connected Youth Centre (Newcastle)*

*Connected Youth Centre* is based in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and is open to young people aged 16-21 on a daily basis. The community consists of young people from the North East as well as second-generation migrants from Africa and some young asylum seekers. As part of the process of designing the structure and content of my participatory arts project, I hosted a series of weekly participatory-video workshops with a group of five migrants and refugees (age range: 17-25 years old), who were service users at the youth centre. Before establishing a film club, I spent six months with the group, having been introduced as a volunteer filmmaker at the youth centre. This period allowed me to become familiar with the participants through observing and documenting their modes of accessing visual material, of disseminating videos and identifying their preferred cultural art-forms (including dance, music, photography).

Through collaborating with the young people over a six-month pilot phase (during Year 1), I had the opportunity to interview them about the creative process and to find out which aspects had worked and which hadn't. In particular, the process allowed me to develop, test and evaluate my initial workshop structure and offered me valuable insights into the importance of creating a sense of shared collaborative space for involved participants in order for them to become in charge of the research process by investing in their creative agency and taking ownership of the final visual artefacts through being involved in the decision-making process and aesthetic presentation.

An important output of this pilot phase was the creation of a participatory film entitled: 'It's About Time' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChQbJULI4vI&t=1s>). The short film was funded by Arts Council England as part of a larger participatory art project 'Lifelines' which involved a series of regional filmmaking workshops and screenings (Figure 13). The film ideas were introduced by myself and was produced in collaboration with two other filmmakers. During that one week of production, the three of us organized a series of filmmaking workshops including: film production training, production (filming and audio recording) and post-production (editing and soundtrack). Young people were invited to interview each other, as well as try different roles such as interviewer, sound recorder, camera operator and director. The film's music was entirely produced by the young people. The film is defined by

multivocality as different voices and experiences alternate throughout its duration, aiming to highlight a range of experiences of belonging and non-non-belonging - depending on participants' background, age, sexuality, gender and class. Such experiences become enacted across Newcastle's landscapes as it follows a core group of five participants walking and dancing in the streets of Newcastle who reflected on their experiences of arriving and living in the UK.

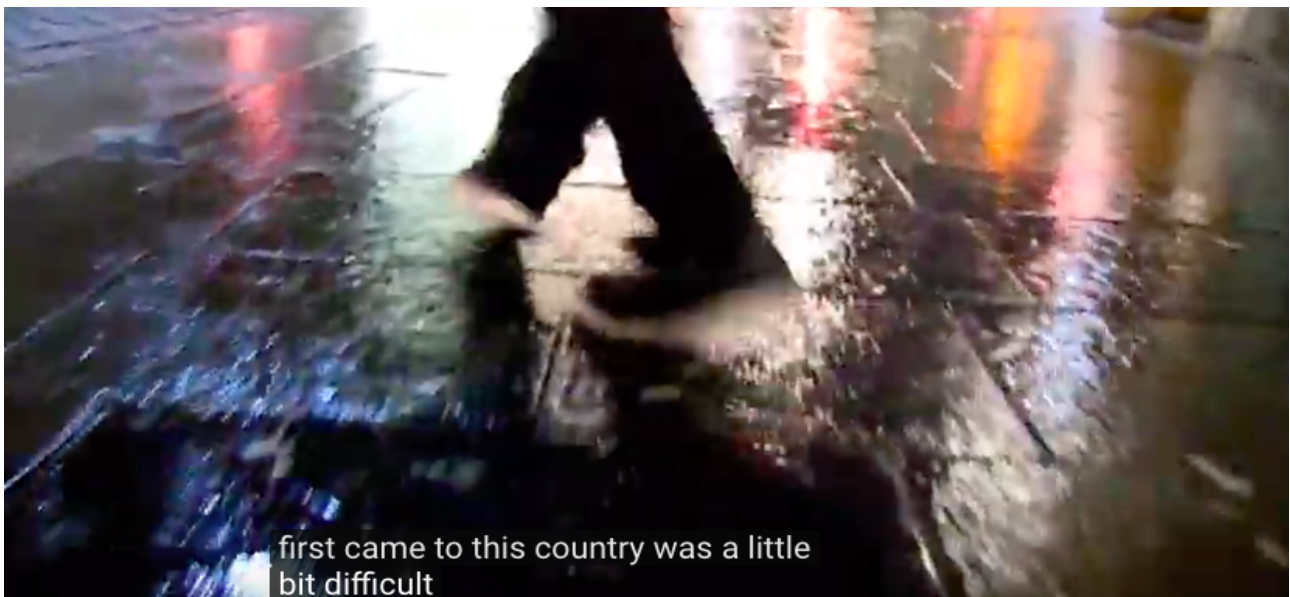


Figure 13: Still from short film 'It's About Time' showing a participant dancing in the streets of Newcastle (2015).

The project culminated with two end-of-project screenings which took place at the youth centre with an audience of thirty young people and a second public screening at the Tyneside Cinema (Newcastle Upon Tyne) during which young filmmakers were invited to the stage and responded to questions from the audience about their involvement.

### *Harmony*

*Harmony* is a community-based organisation based in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, offering a range of music-focused activities and music courses primarily for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Negotiating access with *Harmony* was quite straightforward. I initially contacted the project manager via email and arranged two different meetings in order to discuss my proposed research activity and overall research project. Following approval from the organisation's director I met the relevant workshop facilitators to discuss how the workshop sessions would work. It was decided that I would be recruiting participants individually and arranging workshop sessions myself. Ultimately, *Harmony* served as a primary site for ethnographic

encounters and allowed me to interact and observe certain individuals, but no workshop sessions took place at the venue due to space limitation and the pressure of the organisation's scheduled activities. This was a valuable first lesson in terms of understanding the limitations of introducing new activities within a larger organisation with an already expansive range of services.

### *Sanctuary Stockton*

Sanctuary Stockton offers weekly drop in services for individuals seeking asylum in Stockton, accommodating up to eighty participants in each session who can access a range of activities from English conversation classes, job club, health and hygiene, exercise and 'coffee and cake' time. The volunteer-led project also organises film screenings, field-trips, and food events. The organisation was one of the first groups I contacted as I was interested in working in Stockton-Upon-Tees due to the high numbers of newly arrived asylum seekers. Working across both Newcastle and Stockton would also allow me to compare participants' everyday experiences including housing, integration, socialization, access to activities (i.e. English language, arts and crafts, social events) and others, across two different sized areas. After a series of email requests and on-site visits, I was able to distribute information about my research project and to meet potential informants. I invested a lot of time in building a relationship with *Sanctuary Stockton* in terms of securing their trust and being granted access to their space and community. In particular, the organisers were concerned of any potential risks regarding their service users' anonymity and privacy and whether their engagement could potentially retraumatize them through re-living painful experiences or risk their anonymity through revealing their faces or identifiable personal information. This resulted in us working together with a key project member in order to ensure that my research approach respected their safeguarding policies and prioritised participant safety. Their support was instrumental in terms of participant recruitment through a snowballing effect that allowed me to engage with both female and male participants. Additionally, they generously offered their space for me to deliver a series of creative sessions during their 'women only' activities, allowing me to engage with a total of twenty female asylum seekers and refugees and lead creative activities including drawing and collage.

### *Home & Belonging Arts Project*

The Home & Belonging project (<https://hattongallery.org.uk/home-and-belonging>) was an arts initiative for individuals seeking asylum developed by the Hatton Gallery and Discovery

Museum in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. After emailing the project leads Kath Boodhai and Hazel Barron-Cooper, I was brought into the project as an observer. Following two 'test' sessions, I was invited to participate in the project as a researcher and volunteer-facilitator. Working with an established community allowed me to focus on the delivery and evaluation of the workshop sessions as I was offered access to participants, workshop space and a timeframe for the visual activities. As part of the workshop activities I focused on the production of photo-narratives, inviting participants to produce photographs of their life in the North East and their experiences of displacement as well as produce drawings and collage pieces. Additionally, some individuals engaged in producing personal photographic-galleries, through curating different photographs of themselves or of their interests, their artwork and life experiences. I was also invited to share some of my research as part of a podcast for Refugee Week 2017 as well as support a learning dissemination event during which I shared some images from my research (produced by participants as well as by myself through my visits to Calais and Dunkirk camps) and interviewed visitors within an 'official' UNHCR tent, which was placed outside the Discovery Museum to invite visitors to reflect on the experience of having to live in a tent (Figures 14, 15 and 16).



Figure 14: UNHCR tent placed outside the Discovery Museum in Newcastle Upon Tyne as a learning display during Refugee Week 2017.



Figure 15: Interior of UNHCR tent placed outside the Discovery Museum in Newcastle Upon Tyne as a learning display during Refugee Week 2017.

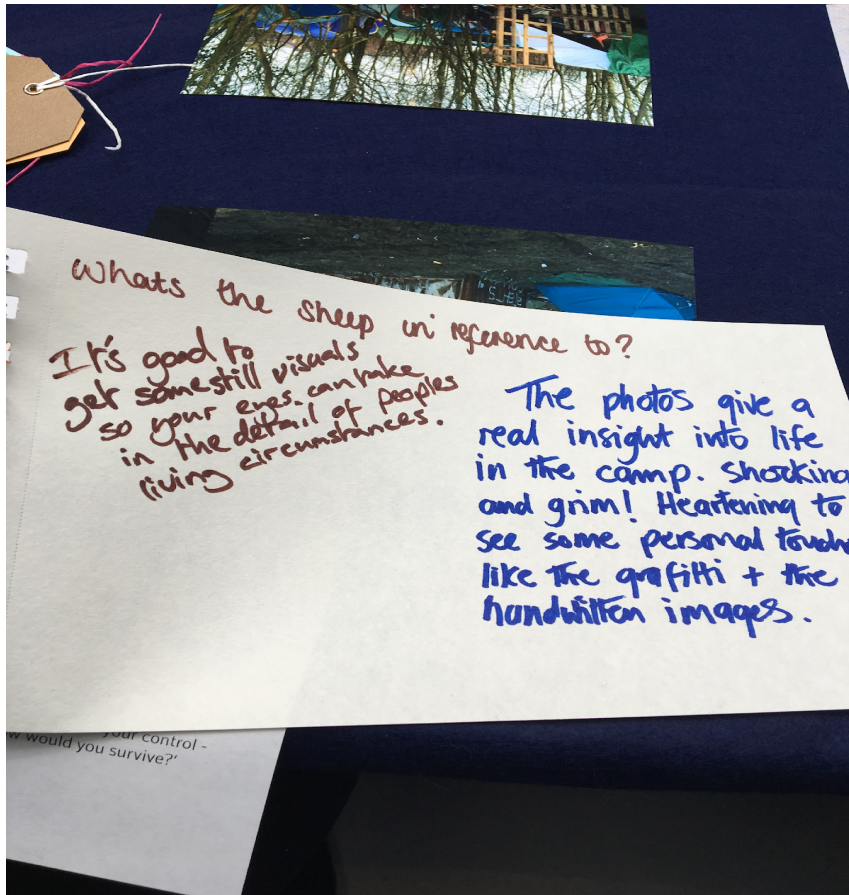


Figure 16: Example of written feedback by visitors in response to photographs at the Discovery Museum (June 2017).

### 3.5 Participant Recruitment

Acquiring access to refugee and asylum seeker communities can be a time-consuming and difficult task, as it is particularly important to be trusted as a researcher in order to enter into a collaborative relationship such as that of a researcher/interviewee (Harrel-Bond and Voutira 2007). During my fieldwork, I interacted with a total of seventy-five individuals seeking asylum in the UK across the North East, who were accessed through arts and advocacy projects, music services and drop-in services.

In order to capture the diversity of experiences by refugees, as well as due to practical concerns, I did not focus on a particular community, country or ethnic background. I also chose not to make any legal/political distinctions between asylum seeker and refugee, and included all interested participants who were claiming asylum in Britain. Understanding that refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogeneous group and trying to avoid 'the over-dependence on one network' that may result in 'the danger of interviewing people with similar experiences' (Bloch 1999: 372), I decided to approach multiple gatekeepers. I was hoping for a snowball effect that would allow for a greater diversity of data and different voices. As Castles et al (2002) reminds us, when conducting qualitative research with individuals seeking asylum it is 'crucial for such research not to rely on only one network' and instead 'to cover a variety of group' (2002: 177-187).

#### 3.5.1 Introducing the Participants

This analysis has been informed by a core group of twelve participants. In the core sample group there were eight male participants and four female participants. Participants originated from Syria (3), Albania (3), Sri Lanka (1), Iran (2), Congo (1), Eritrea. (1) and Nigeria (1). In 2016, the largest number of applications for asylum came from nationals of Iran (4,192), followed by Pakistan (2,857), Iraq (2,666), Afghanistan (2,341), Bangladesh (1,939), Albania (1,488), and India (1,488). There were 1,591 grants of asylum or alternative requests for humanitarian protection to Syrian nationals at initial decision in 2016. According to the Home Office, the grant rate for Syrian applicants was 86%, but some of those who had received a negative decision would have either been transferred to have their case determined by another EU member state, or following investigation applicants might have been found not to be Syrian (Home Office, Immigration statistics, October to December 2016).

Apart from three principal participants who found out about the project through a project poster, most participants were attracted to the project either through word-of-mouth (snowballing effect) or through personal invitations. A high level of English skills was a prerequisite for anyone wanting to be interviewed as I wanted to ensure that all participants fully understood the implications of their participation and could therefore provide informed consent. As a result, I decided not to proceed with a total of three female interested participants as they would require an interpreter and that would create ethical as well as practical challenges in relation to my analysis.

It is important to note however, that my decision to not use an interpreter limited my options regarding participants and introduced a barrier to participation, that of English language knowledge. Moreover, interviewing only participants who can speak English again defined my 'sample' of participants as it required a particular educational background. In order to not exclude individuals who wanted to participate in some of the larger workshops (20-25 participants) I would invite all participants to draw and talk about their paintings but as part of my analysis I only used images of individuals who could be interviewed afterwards in English about their artwork and experiences.

Principal Participants	Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin
1	Khaled	M	Syria
2	Youssef	M	Syria
3	Lina	F	Albania
4	Azadeh	F	Iran
5	Amir	M	Syria
6	Ibrahim	M	Eritrea
7	Riaz	M	Iran
8	Caleb	M	Nigeria

9	Seth	M	Congo
10	Meru	F	Albania
11	Rana	F	Albania
12	Aayansh	M	Sri Lanka

In terms of the process of ‘selection’ of these twelve principal participants, it was primarily determined by individuals’ availability and interest in my research. With many of those participants we continued to meet through the 18-month period of fieldwork in both research and social contexts which allowed me to better understand their lives and stories. During the project, participants were at different stages of their asylum-seeking journeys: only three had received refugee status, while the remaining participants were still in the process of seeking asylum. It is also important to highlight that although participants were identified because of their ‘shared’ experience of forced displacement, they were a heterogeneous group. Additionally, the reasons for which individuals sought asylum varied from political persecution to fears of being persecuted due to their sexuality or avoiding forced marriage and escaping marital abuse.

### **3.6 Establishing A Steering Group for the Creative Activities**

In seeking to develop a participatory project that recognises participants as experts of their own situation, it was important to include a steering group of advisors. My intention was to collaborate with a group of individuals with lived and/or professional experience of forced displacement, with whom I would be able to navigate my research journey with a clearer understanding of the key issues through a more person-centred perspective. Working with such a group would offer me the chance to share and discuss my research findings; to be questioned and challenged, and to be able to involve them during the different stages of planning, analysis, dissemination and project evaluation.

The steering group comprised seven individuals: four female and three male participants. During the setup of the group in November 2016, two members had acquired refugee status

while two were currently in the process of seeking asylum, while the remaining members worked in an outreach position and engaged with communities and individuals seeking asylum through different community projects. I connected with most members through a parallel outreach project and then stayed in touch with all individuals on a personal capacity due to different schedules.

Talking to the members offered me a deeper sense of their everyday schedules, issues around availability (similar to participants) and most importantly a more nuanced understanding of the richness of their cultures and how their memories, identities and stories were all interweaved and infused by tastes, sounds and images from home. This was particularly clear with the members with a Syrian background, who spoke of how they would organize events with music and Syrian food and all dance together. Such insights helped me realise, even more, the need for the project to offer individuals the chance to bring in their distinct cultural backgrounds as that would further enrich my research and include different perspectives and biographical experiences.

The group's feedback was helpful in the shaping of this project's participatory workshop sessions in relation to practical issues of participant recruitment, participant retention, dissemination of findings and in addressing questions of privacy and participant safety. For example, they encouraged me to allow enough time before inviting individuals to participate and to always explain the process in such a way that would highlight their role as contributor, as failure to do would reduce to them to the status of 'a lab rat' according to one of the members who explained that individuals seeking asylum were always been asked to tell their stories and that such a request should be based on respect and recognition of their right to say no.

Due to steering group members' different schedules and availabilities I was not able to continue my collaboration with all individuals. However, there were three key members with whom I continued meeting at different stages of my fieldwork and analysis and to whom I could discuss ethical and analytical issues such as how to better accommodate participants' needs (location of meetings, issues to approach or avoid, as well as their reflections on my initial identified themes and how their experiences compared to my findings).

As Pain and Francis (2003: 53) note, participation takes place on different levels and in often unpredictable ways. My research experience has taught me to be critical and honest about the

challenges of supporting participation and has helped me realise that participation is always contingent on my role as a researcher. My initial understanding and expectation of its role as a collective and multivocal space did not fully materialize due to the fact that not all individuals were able to continue to be actively involved throughout the research as opposed to providing feedback and reflecting on the findings at different stages. Such a lack of continuity did restrict the possibility of a more meaningful dialogue between the group members, myself and the research. On the other hand, it offered flexibility and accessibility to all interested members and allowed them to continue their involvement in their own time, thereby promoting participation as led by participants' priorities and need.

In particular, my study's ethno-mimetic framework enriched participants' participation through moving beyond the collection of data and instead inviting them to further negotiate their narrated experiences through creative means. In doing so they did accomplish change in so far as they challenged the ways in which asylum seekers can be seen and more importantly re-evaluated their stories and self-representations as individuals seeking asylum. Ultimately, my ethno-mimetic approach offered different 'entry points' for participants: participant observation (physical and netnography); biographical/narrative interviews; creative workshops and photo-elicitation dialogues. Participants could therefore participate across different 'research encounters' (Pain and Francis 2003: 46) and explore different ways of sharing and reflecting on their stories. In reflection, the project's steering group became more of an advisory board, whose input, biographies, experiences and knowledge guided and enriched my research process. The following section will offer a detailed overview of my ethno-mimetic methodological approach while outlining the different ways of collaborating with participants.

### **3.7 My Ethno-Mimetic Methodological Approach**

The development of my participatory methodological approach (see Figure 17 below) serves as my personal journey in understanding and capturing the complexity of my research as well as addressing ambiguities within the heterogeneous group of participants with whom I collaborated. My ethno-mimetic approach involved an initial phase of participant observation (months 1-14), one or two narrative interviews with participants (months 6-10), ten creative workshops (months 6-12) and a series of individual photo-elicitation sessions (months 18-22).

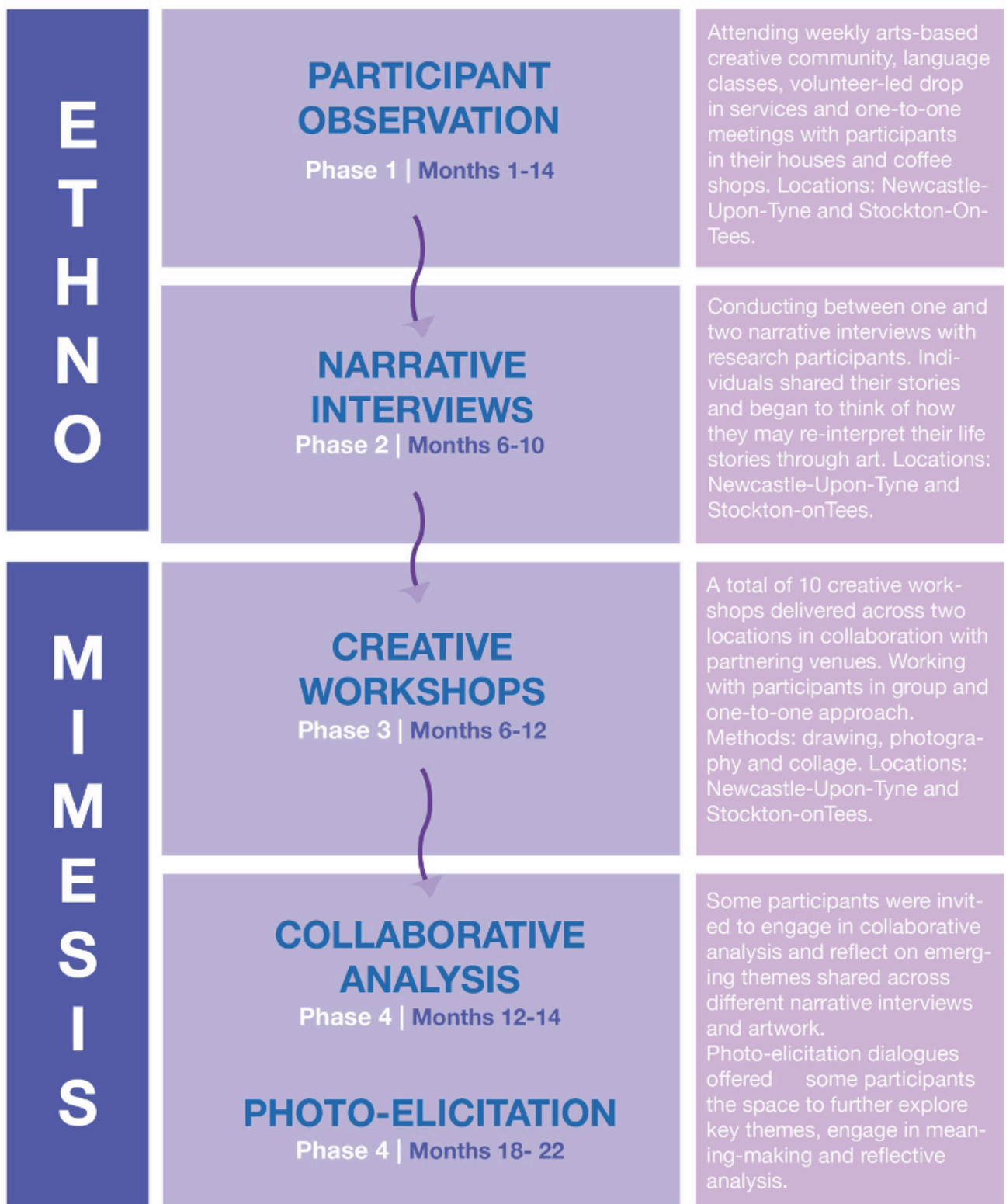


Figure 17: Chart offering a breakdown of the different stages of the research process.

I primarily used ethno-mimesis as a research method but equally it also served as a way of meaning making and reflective interpretation during my research process as I also produced research-inspired, ethno-mimetic texts allowing me to analytically engage with my research process and findings (see example of reflective collage piece, p. 113). In the following sections I outline each phase in turn, focusing on the different methodological and analytical processes employed. Despite touching upon certain practical and ethical challenges, I will address these in more detail in my section on *Ethical Considerations* (3.11, p. 115-122).

### *Phase One: Participant Observation*

An initial fourteen-month period of participant observation shaped the focus of this investigation, allowing for a longer-term, intensive and personal encounter with participants in their daily life environments and activities (Wright and Nelson 1995). This observation period also allowed adequate time for research participants to become familiar with the idea of an outsider and helped set the basis for the collaborative creative partnership further developed during the suggested creative research sessions. Data acquired through participant observation has shaped the thesis's central vignettes and contributed towards my understanding of the principal themes that were later on explored in depth through the interviews, creative sessions and photo elicitation dialogues.

Participant observation is a key methodology often employed in ethnographic research and can be defined as a research strategy that involves participation in the day-to-day activities of participants over an extended period of time (Moffatt 1979: 77). Being able to access the daily lives and routines of my informants allowed me a greater understanding of the different social, cultural and legal spaces they occupy. As an extension, such an insight has shaped the analysis of my data in terms of being able to identify the different structures that impact and shape their acts of self-representation (visual and narrative).

During the period of participant observation, I attended weekly arts-based creative activities, local community-led English language classes and volunteer-led drop in services, and I met participants for coffee and visited their homes. I also made connections with local organisations and gatekeepers and identified possible partner venues for the creative activities. It was a time-consuming process that required negotiation and perseverance in order to adequately explain the project and responsibly address any organisational concerns regarding participant safety. Spending time with participants gave me awareness of their existing routines and individual

needs and also helped me to understand how they presented themselves across different social and narrative spaces and in front of different audiences.

Ethnography can be defined as a 'research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time' (Aull Davies 2008: 5). Although ethnography is traditionally associated with the work of social anthropologists there is a very long tradition of social scientists conducting ethnographic work as a means to obtain a more nuanced understanding of participants' realities, norms and practices within particular socio-cultural contexts (Foote Whyte 1943/1993; Lenette and Brody 2013; Skeggs 2001). Moreover, ethnography allows the production of data through 'engaged listening' (Gerard Forsey 2010), which seems especially relevant to this investigation of stories.

While completing my ethnographic work, I became interested in participants' digital interactions via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The decision to observe and trace their online self-representations emerged organically from encounters with participants who began incorporating images and quotes from their Facebook newsfeeds and profile pages as part of our interviews. This led to my decision to conduct informal netnography, defined by Kozinets (1998) as an interpretive research method that adopts the principles of participant observation in the field of digital communications. Netnography emerged as a way of examining the relationship between online and real-life self-representations, and also as a means of incorporating the data in my one-to-one interviews through comparing the stories generated online with the stories emerging through the interviews and drawing emphasis on common themes. Additionally, it allowed me to understand my participants' existing storytelling strategies and accessible mediums for conveying their stories through their use of mobile photography and social media platforms. This served as a stepping-stone for participants to take ownership of the creative process and produce their individual photographic collections.

Although participant observation allows researchers to generate understanding in partnership with key participants, there are nevertheless limits to the participatory nature of such methodological processes in relation to data interpretation (e.g. final decisions on how to interpret particular data (Wright and Nelson 1995). In response to questions over data validity, Wright and Nelson (1995) suggest a 'creative synthesis' of participant observation and

participatory research, ensuring that participants are engaged as collaborators in order to make the research more meaningful and impactful for participants (Krulfeld 1998; Kirby 1999) as well as recognising participants as 'social actors in their own right' (Porter et al. 2012: 131). My project sought to combine participant observation with participatory arts methodologies and aimed to establish a partnership with participants by inviting them to be involved in the design of this project's methodological apparatus (e.g. workshop sessions).

### *Phase Two: Narrative Interviews*

I then adopted a biographical/narrative approach both methodologically and epistemologically, as I recognised its potential as a process involving meaning-making and supporting self-representation. Narrative interviewing encourages the production of spontaneous and less-formalised narratives while involving minimal guidance from the interviewer (Rosenthal 1993). I designed the interview setting in such a way to enable interviewees to have some freedom in the structure of their stories and the themes these explored (Hebing 2009). In doing so, I was conscious of the dialogical nature of narrative encounters and the potential for shared narrative production and meaning-making processes (see Riessman, 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2002).

By acknowledging existing hierarchies and power imbalances between myself as a researcher and my study's participants, I tried to depart from fixed question/answer formats and understood the interview process as a 'place for exchange' where 'both participants shape the direction and focus of the conversation' (Iqbal 2016: 85). Although I was aware of the need to collect data for my research, I was also alert to following a minimal structure in the narrative interview process (Wengraf 2001) as that would allow me to recognise and respect participants' biography in the process, thereby adopting an egalitarian research framework (Banks and Armstrong 2012). I therefore opted for a single opening narrative question aiming to prompt the interviewee to tell his or her story instead of preparing a set of questions that would restrict the interview 'agenda' (Riessman 2008): '*Can you tell me the story of your experiences of becoming an asylum seeker; leaving your country, and living in Britain*'. Given the freedom to choose their own starting point, most participants would briefly describe their country of origin in relation to the reason(s) for which they left and would then focus on describing their present context and their everyday experiences. I would also prepare additional questions serving as prompts in case a participant needed some guidance, but

always tried to remain attentive and to listen to what they were saying in order to follow up with complementary questions.

My main aim was to ensure that participants would tell their stories without conforming to my own anticipated responses/themes, and in doing so I became more attentive to the narrative paths they occupied and their exemplified agency in their narrative choices. Following completion of an introductory interview I would first ask my participants whether they would like to add anything or whether they had any questions about the research or me. The interview would then conclude with a general question about their plans for the rest of the day in order to complete our conversation in a more informal way. Following transcription and initial analysis of data I would then schedule a follow-up interview in order to focus on particular themes and stories and offer an opportunity for co-analysis.

Participants attended between one and two interviews. The interviews served as an important stage of data collection but equally helped individuals to identify key issues that they could further explore creatively if they wished to do so. Participants completed consent release forms that allowed them to select which type/s of data they would like to share as part of dissemination (i.e. interview transcripts, visual data, photo-elicitation responses). Consent was conceptualised as an ongoing negotiable relationship that was invested in dialogue and knowledge exchange, mirroring the acknowledgement that research itself is a process and not a final outcome (Stavropoulou 2019: 97).

### *Context and Environment of Interviews*

Most participants preferred a one-to-one interview setting instead of using the workshop/arts project space. Thus, we either met at a booked room in one of the partnering organisations or in different coffee shops. The time of the interview was decided by the participants in order to accommodate their schedule and offer them flexibility. The interview duration was described as one to two hours, and generally lasted between sixty to ninety minutes with some exceptional cases lasting up to three hours. Prior to each interview, I would welcome and thank my participants, offer them tea or coffee and proceed with re-introducing my role as a postgraduate researcher and then explain my research as well as outline my plans regarding dissemination. I would ensure that participants understood the purpose of my research and ask them to sign the content release forms prior to our interview.

I only engaged with participants whom I met through those spaces as I wanted to make sure that our first point of contact took place within a familiar and safe setting, hence adding to the sense of security as well as them being in control of the situation. Although participants were given the option of a member of staff attending the interview, all participants decided they preferred a one-to-one interview, in either a familiar service-provided space, or a neutral place such as a coffee house of their choice. In one instance, I was offered the option of an interview space for prospective employees in the hosting organisation, which I kindly declined as I was aware that such a 'strict' setting (white walls, a long rectangular table and two chairs at each side) could potentially trigger negative memories from their asylum-seeking interviews with the Home Office. Instead, I booked the organisation's library room and conducted the interview there.

I soon realised that while having the interviews in coffee shops carried the risk of distractions and lower audio quality, holding interviews in an environment that was not associated with an interview process created a more relaxed atmosphere and offered our 'coffee meetings' a sense of a 'ritual' as we would '*meet at our usual Costa for another research chat.*' I would always offer to buy the coffee as a small 'thank you' for their help but with one particular participant with whom I spent the longest time with, we established an alternating 'coffee rota' as I realised it was important for her to be able to treat me. To say no would symbolically re-introduce a researcher/researched power relationship through denying her the 'right' to be recognised as my equal and could create more harm by re-victimising her.

### *Phase Three: Creative Workshops*

In deciding to deliver a participatory arts-based research project, one must be willing to 'let go' and to adapt. This was one of the biggest lessons I learned quite early onto my fieldwork as I realised the complexities of trying to deliver structured workshop sessions within established refugee support/activity-orientated spaces. Although I had access to safeguarding and infrastructure support (in terms of venue access and access to participants) I had to rely on my own social skills in terms of 'inspiring' individuals to participate in the workshop sessions and therefore creating and sustaining a core group of participants. Practical challenges in terms of availability, personal circumstances and different interests, led to a revision of my primary workshop structure in order to accommodate my participants' needs. As a result, I was involved in a total of three group workshop sessions with five participants in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, three group workshop sessions with twenty participants in Stockton-On-Tees, one one-to-one

creative sessions in Newcastle Upon Tyne, and three one-to-one creative sessions in Stockton-On-Tees.

Individualised project posters and information leaflets were sent via email to all four participating organisations/projects, in order to be disseminated at each venue and to inform potential participants of the workshop sessions as well as my presence in their space as an observer. The project was introduced as an arts-based empowerment project allowing the production of new representations of refugee and asylum seekers' stories (Appendix: Project Poster). The workshops and one-to-one creative sessions took place after the period of participant observation, which allowed adequate time for: project briefing, explanation of workshop aims and objectives, development of creative ideas and establishment of a relationship of trust between researcher and participants.

Group workshops were organised and delivered in collaboration with partnering venues that would offer access to their premises and support staff to help out during the sessions. During one of the group workshops, I had the opportunity to work closely with a women's only group (some of the women were also part of my core research group). I collaborated with one of the venue's key members in order to identify suitable dates for the three workshops (Friday morning 10-12AM). She was responsible for booking the venue while I designed the poster (Figure 18), which she then disseminated through her phone via the WhatsApp application and via email.

Our first workshop began with an overview of the research project and an introduction of the topic of the day: self-identity. That first session was inviting participants to visually represent themselves through collage-making: 'Today I would like us to tell a story about ourselves through pictures.' Participants were asked to reflect on their journeys to the UK and focus on themselves as central protagonists of such a journey.

# Visual Stories

Creative sessions: visual arts, collage & photography



A series of creative research workshops during which we will be making creative portraits of our selves through painting, collage and photography. Each session we will be working with a different theme: identity, image, and story.

This is a safe space where participants can share stories about themselves and find new ways to represent themselves and their experiences through arts-based methods.

This is a participatory group project – everyone’s opinion matters and will be heard. We will also be discussing opportunities to present some of the produced artwork as part of *Refugee Week 2018*.

**Schedule:** Friday morning 10-12PM

**Venue:** (Removed due to privacy and participant safety issues)

Figure 18: Workshop programme (poster) designed for women’s only group creative research.

I adopted the definition<sup>7</sup> of collage as introduced by Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010:2): ‘Collage, taken from the French verb, *coller* (to stick), is the process of using fragments of found images or materials and gluing them to a flat surface to portray phenomena.’ In the context of my ethno-mimetic approach, collage-making served as a point of reference for participants to

<sup>7</sup> A more extensive definition of collage-making is offered by Davis and Butler-Kisber (1999) which highlights its intuitive nature: ‘A collage is a flexible composition that is assembled gradually and additively; as each new part is included, the intuitive relationships among the various parts are ordered and re-ordered until a convincing overall pattern or schema is achieved (1999: 2).

talk about their life stories and to re-interpret these experiences creatively (see example, p. 208).



Figure 19: Collage-making workshop, Stockton-on-Tees.

I also explained that through this research project we had the option to present artwork as part of a public event celebration during Refugee Week 2018, an annual week-long festival celebrating the contribution of refugees through public events (i.e. music concerts, exhibitions, screenings, art displays etc) across the UK. If participants felt comfortable, I was planning on creating photo mosaics combining different photos of their artwork or themselves in order to celebrate their stories and life journeys as part of the festival.

After introducing myself I asked the group to go around and introduce themselves – if they felt like doing so. It was really important for myself to emphasize the shared values of our research relationship by stating that this was a safe space in which participants could share any personal experiences and equally could chose not to.

Moreover, everyone had the right to speak their mind while also respecting other members of the group by not interrupting, judging or undermining their words. Next step involved explaining what we would be doing while collage-making and asking if they had any questions, concerns or alternative creative ideas they'd like to share.

When planning for the creative workshops it was crucial to initiate the process with a non-invasive artform that could incite non-textual forms of self-representation (see Vacchelli 2017: 176), while also not requiring pre-existing artistic skills as that could possibly become a barrier of participation. Collage was picked as a creative activity that does not require any special artistic knowledge and that encourages creative experimentation and playfulness. Once we

established that everyone understood the activity and had access to the materials, we started creating. Each participant would focus on her own artwork while I moved around the space answering any questions they might have and taking notes. Once everyone had finished working on their collage piece, I invited them to talk about their creations in front of the group or in private. I also asked participants if they would like to be photographed while holding it in front of their face. By doing so, they could still have their 'portrait' taken but in a way that did not jeopardise their privacy and anonymity. All participants agreed to have their photographs taken as well as were happy for their photograph and collage piece to be included as part of three collective posters for Refugee Week 2018 (see Figures 20, 21 & 22). Before ending the workshop, I also asked participants to share any thoughts about the session - whether they enjoyed it or not; to suggest any activities they'd like to organise for future sessions or to discuss personal art projects that they had been working on in their own time. During most sessions we would close the session with hot drinks and cake, which also served as time for participants to unwind and chat about other aspects of their lives.

Over a period of three weeks, this group produced around eighty pieces of drawing and collage. Each piece would tell a different story about themselves and in some cases capture a different phase of their lives as their legal journeys continued. Through my engagement with this project I had the opportunity to showcase some of the work produced by the women during Refugee Week 2018 at Arc Stockton - a local cinema and arts centre, as well as be interviewed by a local filmmaker as part of a larger documentary for Refugee Week. The event at ARC Stockton, included stalls for different local community projects and service providers supporting refugees and asylum seekers (i.e. housing support, legal aid etc.) as well as live music, fashion shows, film screenings, art exhibitions and talks. We were able to present the three photo mosaics (Figures 20, 21 & 22), while also having the opportunity to talk to members of the community about the research. Some of the research participants also attended the event with their partners and friends. Once Refugee Week was over, the three posters were placed on the project venue's walls as a celebration and memento of the women's group work.



Figure 20: Holding Our Image. Photograph by Nelli Stavropoulou

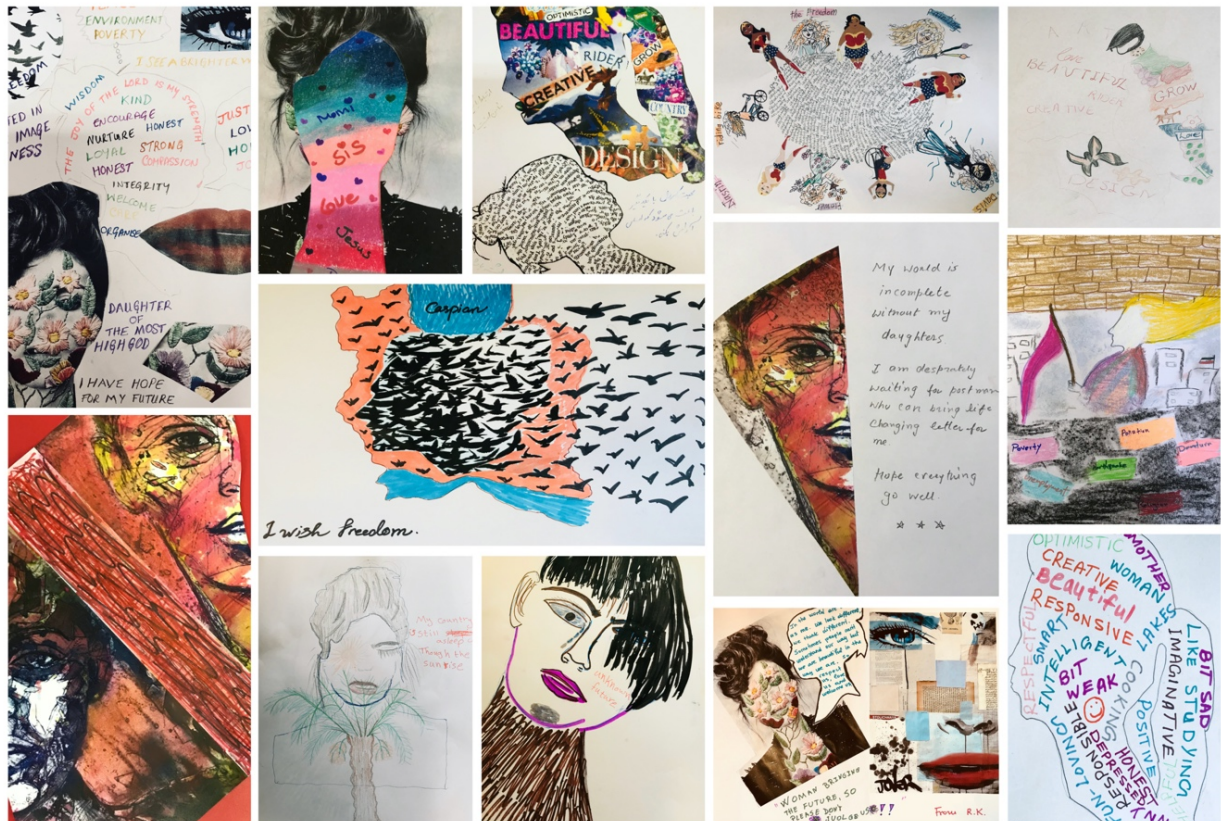


Figure 21: Self Portrait. Photograph by Nelli Stavropoulou



Figure 22: Alphabet. Photograph by Nelli Stavropoulou

### *Participatory Photography:*

Participatory photography and variations such as photovoice (Wang 1999) were introduced as action-oriented visual methods that foster a collaborative research process (Miller 2015). Photovoice is a community-based research (CBR) methodology pioneered by Wang and Burris (1997) in their research carried out with women in rural China. The process involves offering participants cameras for them to document important issues as a means to facilitate knowledge production and critical dialogue, and inform decision-making (Wang and Burris 1997; Mitchell 2011; Stavropoulou 2019: 98). A typical methodological design involves the establishment of a sharing circle during which each participant shares their opinions and reflects on the photographs they have produced (Wang and Burris 1997; Stavropoulou 2019: 98).

Photovoice is rooted in three principal theoretical frameworks: Freire's (1973) philosophical positioning of problem-solving education which employed photographs as tools for critical analysis of social problems; feminist theory (Williams and Lykes 2003) and community-based photography, which invites ordinary people to use 'images of themselves' to 'counteract stereotypes' (Spence 1995: 35 cited in Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001: 561) and to accomplish self-identification. Participatory photography is also defined by a participatory action research (PAR) framework as it combines education, collaboration and action (Prins 2010: 428).

Participants were asked to produce a collection of five images that visually represented their experiences. They were also encouraged to take ownership of the creative process in terms of their employed mediums and curatorial approach when selecting which images to include as part of their photographic collections. Most participants used their mobile phones to produce images, while others used their own digital cameras. Images included locations, objects, individuals and in some cases, artwork produced by participants themselves. Recognising the limitations of asking individuals to produce images as part of this project – both in relation to time constraints but also due to reservations around artistic skills, they were also given the option of submitting existing images. Such a suggestion further democratized the research process by offering more options to participants and also offered them the opportunity to insert existing images and stories as part of our research dialogues. Some participants shared existing images from their mobile phones as well as their personal social media accounts, whereas others sourced online images published under a Creative Commons license.

Although Photovoice has been widely employed as method for engaging marginalised voices, it has also received criticism in relation to ethical considerations in participatory photography (Allen 2012), and particular in relation to what is described as the ‘crisis in representation’ (Harper 2012). The concept of ‘crisis’ refers to the way in which images can be misleading in creating false portrayals of an individual, community or place. Although such concerns mostly result from the photographer being the primary researcher, it is still important to be considered when examining participant-led photography (Sanon et al. 2014). This extends to a criticism also raised by Haaken and O’Neill (2014) addressing the number of Photovoice projects on asylum seekers that capture testimonies that ‘separate testifier and text as critical junctures in the process of producing documents’ (Haaken and O’Neill 2014: 84). In presenting produced content to policy makers and donors, images may be manipulated to serve ‘the aesthetics of powerful spectators’ (Ibid: 2014: 84), hence turning the participants themselves into spectacles of victimhood.

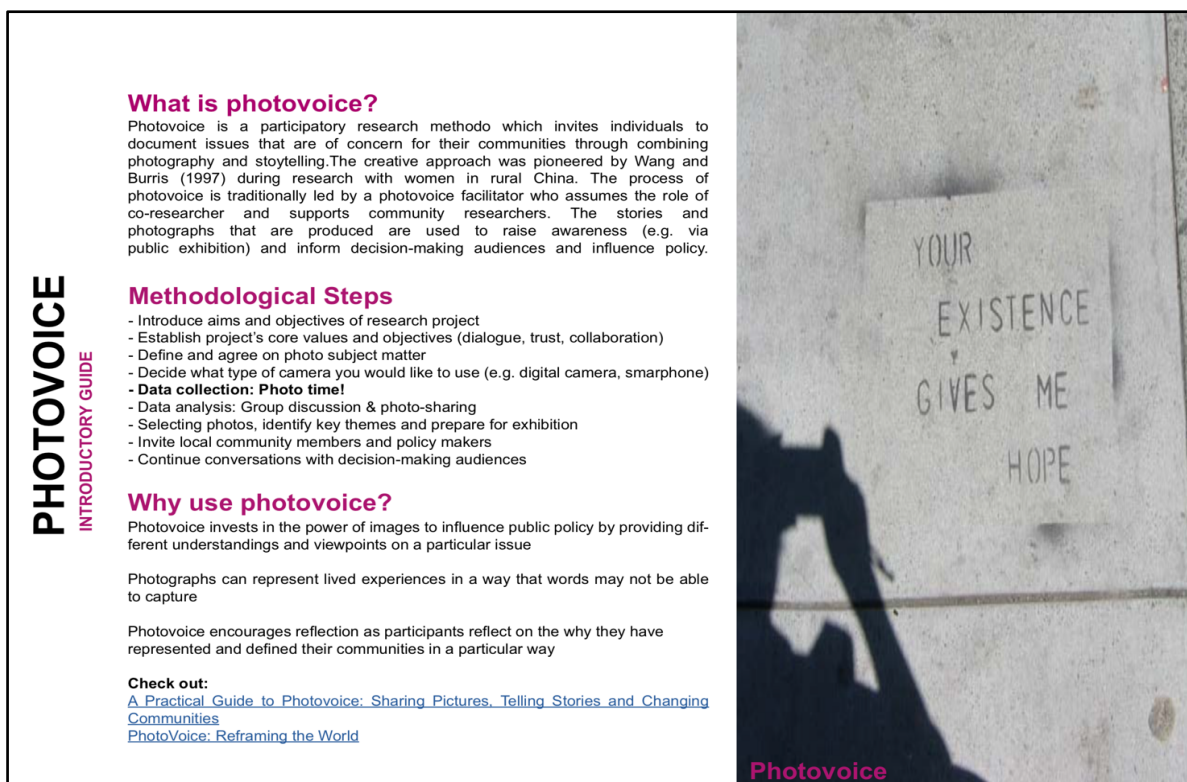


Figure 23: Self-produced *Photovoice* introduction guide from personal archive.

Though Photovoice presents certain complex challenges, those should not be seen as a limitation per se (Sanon et al. 2014). Photovoice remains a methodology that is adaptable and responsive to the needs of the participants and if positioned within a goal-oriented social plan it can serve as a means of challenging dominant narratives, and an effective tool for social

change (Green and Kloos 2009). Employing triangulation with other methods allowed me to address any possible analytical concerns and to better identify how my key research themes spanned across all data. Having such a diverse range of data further enriched my analysis and allowed me to better understand complexities of storytelling and how the same story can be represented different across various mediums (photograph, verbal account, text etc.).

#### *Phase Four: Photo-elicitation*

Following completion of the creative research workshops, participants were invited to reflect on the images that they had produced. Such images served as storytelling bridges for individuals to further explore their lived experiences through images and their accompanying stories. The method of photo-elicitation involves inserting photographs into a research interview setting and has been developed in the fields of anthropology and visual sociology (Harper 2002: 13; Harper and Faccioli 2000). The images can be introduced by the researcher or by participants themselves. The combination of images and words as part of an interview changes the way in which individuals respond due to the role of images as symbolic representations (Vacchelli 2017: np) and their potential to promote 'reflections that words alone cannot' (Clark-Ibanez 2007: 171).

The method of photo-elicitation was a crucial stage of my ethno-mimetic approach as it offered participants the opportunity to reveal their intentions behind their photographs. In comparison to visual methods such as photovoice, photo-elicitation approaches prioritise the role of images as means of producing rich verbal data, surpassing the role of visual responses themselves (Guillemin and Drew 2010: 1678). The photo-elicitation dialogues would take place during the workshops on a one-to-one basis or in following up meetings at coffee shops. A combination of group and individual photo-elicitation conversations was preferred as it allowed individuals greater freedom in discussing often sensitive or personal information but also allowed for more meaningful meaning making.

For some participants producing images seemed quite strange so as an alternative strategy I asked them to imagine 'photographs' of key facets of their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK or asked them to select images from their mobile phones and or social media accounts. In some cases, I would also identify certain images and ask them about them as part of the interviews. Their responses were often illuminating, as this excerpt from an interview with one of the research participants demonstrates:

The first one is going to be waiting at the airport before going inside. The second one is, there was something happen, at the airport they kept telling me that I had to wait, I had to wait two hours, two hours, and it was more than one day. So I got really angry, and I was already stressed, and I told them that I want to go back. Like I was scared that they are going to send me back and I paid the money. At the same time, so what? I was angry, that was also another one. I feel like I was in a real prison. I can't do anything. The third one, [3 second pause] when I arrived to Whitfield, to the camp, to the hostel. The fourth one is when I received the interview. The last one is with some of my friends at a music festival. **(Youssef, interview response)**

Younger participants' familiarity with photography as an everyday practice meant that some participants became more imaginative and creative in the photographs they produced either through engaging with abstract concepts or through combining text and images. Having the space and time to reflect on their personal photographic collections, offered participants the chance to critically reflect on what it meant for them to be an asylum seeker in the UK and how such an experience had shaped their personhood. During the start of my project, most participants had not been involved in similar arts project whereas others had been involved in either Council-led surveys, University research projects or evaluations provided by service providers.

During the photo-elicitation conversations participants were also asked to reflect on this study's creative methodology. Participants commented on their expectations of such an approach, as initially certain individuals claimed to have no creative skills. Most participants who engaged in the creative workshops commented on the possibilities for self-expression:

We need some space to say something, to speak about yourself. We have a lot of stress in our life. So, we need something to do it easy, to let us think. We have beautiful things here to do it. I enjoy too much, because I love art and when I come here I have something to do it and I can explain about myself more. **(Sara, reflections on creative process)**

An important analytical moment occurred as participants reflected on how the process of representing their experiences visually offered them the opportunity to distance themselves from their everyday realities so that they could critically articulate opinions and feelings that they felt might be dangerous to say. As one participant, Leyla explained:

In our everyday life if you are an asylum seeker you need to be careful of what you say. You can't be too sad, too happy or too angry. Sometimes it feels like you are not allowed to have an opinion because you might seem ungrateful. With this project I feel I am safe to say what I think. **(Leyla, reflections on process)**

Azadeh also explained how creative expression 'doesn't have to be in your face' but can still be effective in communicating 'messages in a sensitive way' while also 'showing you the other side of things.'

### **3.8 Interviews with Other Representatives**

Alongside the interviews with individuals seeking asylum, I conducted interviews with professionals who were working with individuals claiming asylum across the North East. These professionals included a legal professional, an outreach officer, a support worker, and a community artist. I hoped that their insights would complement my ethnographic research and would better contextualise my participants' narratives. Initially I approached a wider range of professionals including: legal officers, charity workers and community artists in order to ensure a range of viewpoints. In the end, I chose to collaborate closely with a smaller number of individuals due to their availability and ongoing interest in my project. Working with some of them over a longer period of time (during 2 years) allowed me to revisit some of my questions, share some of my initial findings with them, and also to acquire a deeper understanding of their practices. The choice of professionals/experts was not accidental; I thought carefully about what kind of 'voices' I would like to invite to participate in this research project. It made sense to include individuals whose perspectives focused on asylum claim, integration, service provision and creative production as these four concepts became central to this investigation through my participant's stories.

The interview questions were directly developed through the themes I identified during the study. Interviewees were once again given the option of not answering particular questions as well adding any final thoughts after the interview had been completed. Interviews were conducted in their professional environment or via Skype due to long-distance. As this section has established, adopting an ethno-mimetic approach has allowed me to engage with a range of complex data that further enrich my analysis. Despite the democratic potential of such a participatory methodology it is still imperative to reflect on my role as a researcher and more importantly my role in analysing and disseminating my research findings.

### 3.9 Analysing Stories (Oral, Visual & Text)

Analysis of biographical and visual data was conducted across several phases. I first conducted a thematic analysis to identify key themes from my data including: interview transcripts, field notes and recorded conversations with participants during participant observation periods, creative sessions and photo-elicitation dialogues. I analyzed the visual data per participant, examining their selection as a whole and as individual images. I then identified common themes across participants' images, comparing and thematically categorizing all images. I employed interpretive phenomenological approaches in order to examine the images with respect to the meaning participants constructed and attached to their surrounding social reality (Stavropoulou 2019: 99). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) encourages individuals to describe and reflect on their experiences and their understanding of how they 'find themselves *in-the-world*' (Boden et al 2018). IPA was particularly helpful in analysing participants' images as it allowed me to engage with their images as visual metaphors that offered rich description, additional storytelling cues and initiated participant-led, meaning-making processes. This is because metaphors are multidimensional (Svendler Nielsen 2009) and can 'work simultaneously across different sensory registers to summon up a holistic, situated, bodily experience and translate it into a reflective, verbalized account' (Stelter 2000).

Additionally, I used a combination of symbolic interactionism and performative narrative analysis to analyze interview transcripts before and after the participatory creative sessions, with a focus on how individuals present themselves through the stories they share (see Riessman 2005). In reminding myself that participants' narrated accounts were relational and situational, I was aware of the conditions under which such narrative interactions occur – starting with that of our research space. My analysis examined a range of storytelling contexts

including: asylum interview, Facebook, research interview, workshops, paying attention on how participants are engaging with, responding to and anticipating different audiences, and are aware of the consequences and impact of narration. When engaging with participants' stories I was therefore interested in the conditions under which they were produced, as well as the different inter-related narrative frameworks in which they were positioned. Such a process became easier and clearer with time as I became aware of the different layers of meanings and underlying narrative references. As Plummer (2013: 212) observes,

(...) stories are never transparent all at once: they are rarely immediately clear. Narrative understanding requires the space to sit and state, ponder and puzzle and life often does not offer such a space. But like a slow moving veil or curtain, the wisdoms of our stories can be revealed gradually. We grasp our meaning slowly, bit by bit. We need to appreciate stories.

Through continuously revisiting the question of 'why' a story was told in a particular way, I was able to further understand the relationship between dominant narratives and individuals' stories and how the former shaped or constrained particular stories (see also Smith 2017: 43).

As Plummer (2016) argues, telling stories and their impact on how they shape 'the world politically, ethically and culturally' rests on a particular fivefold structure of when a story 'is being told (time), where it is being told (place and space), who it addressed (audience), why it is being told (audience), and what is being told (contents). Plummer's work is relevant in enriching my symbolic interactionism analytical framework as he has contributed significantly to my understanding of stories as symbolic interactions, invested in recognising individuals' 'symbol-producing capacity which enables them to produce a history, a culture, and very intricate webs of ambiguous communication' (Plummer 2016). A key focus of interactionist sociology are the processes by which individuals create meaning as well as the ways in which they define themselves, their behaviours, emotions, and actions, in order to produce stories that explain their life events and actions, while such meanings are produced through interaction with others (Plummer 2016). These continuous interactions support strategies of producing a sense of self and in extension maintain a biography that is constantly evolving and responding to new interactions. According to Blumer (1969) interactionism rests on three key premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (1969: 2)

In his discussion of 'a sociology of stories', Plummer (1995) explored the methodological implication of narrative in social analysis in terms of accounts of sexual, as well as recognised stories as political actions that serve as products of social change. Plummer's sociology of stories moves beyond analysing the formal structures of stories and narratives, and instead focuses on their social and political role by paying attention to the ways that stories are told, received, changed and reproduced.

In his book *Politics and Narrative Flows: The Life Story of Stories*, Plummer suggested a model of 'storytelling in the stream of power' (Plummer 1995: 26). The book outlines the different stages through which stories are produced through a political process:

- Imagining – visualizing – empathizing;
- Articulating- vocalizing – announcing;
- Inventing identities – becoming storytellers;
- Creating social worlds/ communities of support;
- Creating a culture of public problems.

Plummer's model outlines the 'journey' of stories, which is particularly relevant to this thesis, by explaining the process from silence to telling stories leading to public narrative. Such a journey was also supported through the process of ethno-mimesis as it allowed the transition between narrative production to social praxis through inviting the re-interpretation and re-imagining of lived experiences and stories as visual instances of resistance and social critique.

Furthermore, such an approach echoes Arendt's (1958) understanding of stories as 'our key way for moving from the subjective to the public, from the personal world to the political one' (Plummer 2017: 283). However, it is important to remain cautious of potential analytical risks of assuming a common 'pattern' across all storytelling practices and therefore requires continuous critical interrogation of the processes and condition of individual storytelling acts.

This analytical approach is employed throughout this thesis in three ways: first, by identifying the position and role of participants' stories within existing hierarchies of power and systems of oppression (i.e. legal infrastructure, citizenship, culture of disbelief). Secondly, by examining how participants' stories are embedded and responsive nature to cultural frameworks (i.e. media documentation, social media and popular culture); and finally, by analysing the conditions and infrastructures to which they respond to (legal audiences and within host community social settings and asylum seeking communities). Such a multi-layered analysis can be seen through my analysis of participants' accounts of having to present their claims in front of decision-making audiences and in a particular way that operates in accordance to criteria of deservingness as defined by one's vulnerability. Additionally, depending on their audiences and social environments, participants may have to perform/sound/look like an 'asylum seeker' in different social contexts, such as in interactions with their case workers or members of the general public, questioning their right to be 'here'.

As I progressed with fieldwork, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the term 'giving voice.' Why and how was my project giving voice? And was that really my role? Whose voice was it really? And who benefited from telling such stories? Could one voice be louder than another or perhaps more or less important? Instead, my participatory research was guided by my commitment to facilitate a 'safe space' for voices to be heard and listened to (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Active verbs such as 'allowing' or 'giving' used in relation to the concept of 'voice' appear problematic when thinking about participation and should be reviewed with some critical reflection. As Ashby (2011) argues, such a practice of *giving voice* might result in reinforcing the system of oppressions that it seeks to subvert as it implies particular power hierarchies and privilege by assuming that the role of the researcher is that of giving voice to his or her research participants and therefore rendering them *voiceless* or *silenced*. According to Barrera (2011) such statements also reveal the awkward question of how these voices became silenced in the first place (2011: 5). It therefore became important for myself as a researcher to think of the social structures, the barriers and the narrative expectations that

were embodied and reproduced by my participants at an affective level and to also think of the motivations behind such 'voices'.

Another level of complexity around the notion of voice emerged in relation to the use of pictures and the need to understand them as contextualised, self-constructed visual representations supporting particular narratives. Luttrell and Chalfen (2010) invite us to remain critical of the role of photographs in relation to the notion of voice when they ask:

How can photographs be thought of having, or be said to have, voices? Or are we referring to the verbalisations that are made and/or voices that are heard alongside/about photographs? Is there a sense that visual voices are doing what verbal ones cannot? (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010: 200).

Through various encounters with my participants, I realised that the produced photographs served as points of departure for highly complex and reflective narratives that were produced in response to my question 'what were you trying to show through this image?' Visual material did not unlock new voices; however, it did amplify existing creative voices through experimentation as participants became increasingly bolder in their visual production, and at the same time engaged in meaning-making through employing visual metaphors and symbolism. Instead of understanding voice as something that can be given, it should be understood as something that is being co-constructed and that is historically, socially and culturally specific (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010).

### **3.10 Positionality**

I understand the term positionality as encompassing both an individual's world-view and the position they occupy in relation to a particular research project (Foote and Bartell 2011; Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013). Within the research process, positionality 'reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study' and is mapped out in relation to the three areas of the subject, the participants, and the research context and process (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013: 71). Some aspects of positionality are culturally ascribed (i.e. gender, race, nationality); whilst others such as personal life history and lived experiences are subjective (Chiseri-Strater 1996). Understanding positionality is necessary in understanding subjectivity. St Louis and Barton (2002: np) define subjectivity as the life experiences that researchers have had as well as the social, cultural, and political factors that

influence an individual and how those experiences and factors contribute to biases and assumptions in the type of research that researchers choose to engage in.

### *My research story*

In reflecting on my own positionality, I realise the various spaces I am positioned within. I see myself as a Greek woman, currently in her early thirties, married, an expat living abroad since the age of eighteen, a community artist, a PhD student and the granddaughter of a Greek national who was expelled from Istanbul in 1964 as a result of the government's decision to denounce the 1930 Greek – Turkish Treaty of friendship and expel the majority of Greeks living in Turkey. Up until the end of my first year as a PhD student, I interpreted my decision to pursue such a research project as a logical professional progression allowing me to combine my interests in community arts engagement/community outreach and academic research - in particular qualitative research that explores individuals' experiences. My five-year experience as a community arts facilitator and charity worker had offered me the opportunity to collaborate and co-create with different groups of participants such as at-risk young people, migrants, refugees and BME women groups and through my scholarship I was given the opportunity to further explore the role of creative methodologies and self-representation.

What became clearer throughout my research experience was the centrality and internalised reception of my grandfather's and mother's stories. The stories about having to endure physical examination in case they were 'hiding' any valuables in their underwear, the story about my great grandfather suffering a stroke as a result of the stress while being questioned by immigration officers and all these stories about lost homes, friends as well as my grandfather's illegal one-month stay in prison. To an extent, my grandfather's stories nurtured and foregrounded my curiosity and compassion towards experiences of forced displacement with a particular focus on how such a story may shape individuals' sense of belonging as well as dictate their self-definitions.

In the past ten years, his story of loss has repeatedly been narrated as a story of resilience and personal success as *despite* 'losing everything' he has been able to provide for his family, lead a successful career and make a name for himself. I cannot in any way compare my grandfather's experience to those of my participants as my grandfather was a Greek citizen and therefore the process of integration was far more straightforward from a legal point of view as well as in terms of his access to social and cultural capital due to the fact that he had been brought up in

Greece until the age of eighteen. Nevertheless, in engaging with stories of displacement, life in exile and belonging, my understanding and reaction to them has been shaped by my family's own (hi)stories.

#### *My role as a researcher and/or friend*

In conducting fieldwork, one enters a relationship of trust and a process of partial exchange. I have always felt grateful towards my participants and honoured by their willingness to share their stories but also humbled by the gratitude they express towards my willingness to listen to their stories, which frequently makes me reflect on the power imbalances of our different roles. Due to the confessional nature of our exchanges and our long-term interaction, I have grown quite fond and close with some of my primary participants which has led to situations during which the lines between researcher and friend became blurred.

From a traditional (positivist) viewpoint, relations between researcher and researcher need to remain separate as any personal involvement could potentially bias the research, disturb the natural setting, and/or contaminate the data (Douglas and Carless 2012). In contrast, feminist-informed ethnographic perspectives highlight the usefulness of developing close relationships with participants in terms of initiating personal investment in the research process, a sense of shared purpose as well as emotional attachment (Hampshire et al 2014). Within qualitative research, friendship has been employed as an effective method in order to 'get to know others in meaningful and sustained ways' (Douglas and Carless 2012: 4; Fine 1994). As Tillmann-Healy (2003) reminds us, friendship as a methodology can support a dialogical relationship.

I recall with the help of my fieldnotes when one of my participants opened up about his mental health history and told me that he only felt comfortable talking to me about these things and felt like no one else cared. His words made me think a lot my responsibility as a researcher and the difference between my legal/professional responsibilities and my personal ones. As Hampshire et al (2014) note, relationships formed during fieldwork beg important ethical questions about blurring boundaries between researcher/friend, confidentiality and trust as well as anticipation and prevention of harm (see also section 3.11, p. 115-119).

As we sat across at a coffee place in Newcastle I encouraged him to talk more about his feelings and suggested that he should talk with someone from the organisation through which we met. I also asked whether he would ever consider talking to a professional someone who would be

able to provide more support. He explained that he didn't 'need counselling, he needed a friend', which again highlighted the tension I had been feeling as I had come to occupy these two different roles. Through scheduling specific 'research/co-analysis days' in contrast to coffee catch-ups I was able to separate the two roles. Despite not always being able to use data, my priority always remained participants' wellbeing and their confidentiality.

### *My responsibility*

During the process of participant recruitment, I was approached by three interested individuals who wanted to find out whether their involvement in the project would support their asylum case. In particular, one of them asked whether I could write a letter of support towards her appeal case on the grounds of her potential participation in the project. After a long conversation with them I explained that I was not able to provide a letter due to various reasons and that the project was a completely separate, independent research project that would have no impact on her claim. I decided not to further proceed with trying to interview that person as I felt that I would be taking advantage of any expectations they may have towards myself and the project, and instead to let them decide whether they would like to still be involved. Although in the end they did not participate in this research, it did serve as a valuable lesson of the expectations that can be attached to my role as a researcher and the position of influence and responsibility that I acquired.

This experience also served as a valuable reminder of how the stories that emerge through my fieldwork are influenced and determined by their experience of seeking asylum as for the majority of the research participants, claiming asylum was an ongoing and emotionally-charged process that had not yet been resolved. As I was asking participants to share stories and images of their experiences, I was particularly aware and considerate of their right to not speak, as well as that the produced narratives should not be understood as isolated narrative phenomena, but should also be conceptualised as dialogical narrative acts, responding to the wider process of seeking asylum.

### *Guilt and letting go*

From the beginning of my research project, my supervisory team emphasized two key things: the need for self-care and their availability and role as a support mechanism if I ever needed to talk about the emotional impact of my research. They were right about both of them. I quickly found out that self-care is essential when conducting participatory research with individuals

who may have experienced traumatic life-events as it can sometimes be difficult to retain emotional distance when being repetitively immersed in stories of pain and loss. It was only after having coffee with a fellow migration researcher that I found out about the concept of 'vicarious trauma' defined as 'the transformation of the researcher's inner experience as a result of empathetic and repeated engagement with survivors and their trauma material' (Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995: np).

Although I had not experienced such an effect it did make me think about self-care and think I would need to find a way of releasing the emotional tension that would sometimes remain long after the interviews. I therefore began daily meditation as well as started a research diary which focused on the emotional experience of my research both in terms of the process as well as the content. I found the diary to be quite liberating. It not only served as a safe space for me to try to articulate what I felt but also it allowed me to take a step back and reflect on my role and behaviour as a researcher. It allowed me to reflect on my motivations, aspirations and served as a reminder of the need for reflexivity and transparency. Ultimately, the biggest difficulty for me was to acknowledge and to face feelings of guilt as well as to be able to draw boundaries between participant and personal needs as I found it difficult certain times to manage expectations and also to accept that I could not practically help their cases or asylum claims.

My supervision sessions also served as a safe space for myself to discuss some experiences that I could never have anticipated while completing my Department's Ethics and Risk Assessment form. I still remember that overwhelming feeling of panic when one of my participants fainted in the middle of her kitchen floor a few minutes before our interview. At that moment, my main responsibility lay in allowing space for her to recover, offering to take her to the hospital, preparing a cup of coffee and a biscuit and staying with her until she felt better. No amount of training, reading or careful planning can prepare you for the unexpected and certain times it can be as simple as a 'wrong' question that stirs up painful memories or a health-related situation. What I learned through my fieldwork is that the best thing I could do during such interactions was to always prioritise participants' well-being and equally to set up support and release mechanisms for myself.

### *My story of belonging*

Having lived in the UK since 2005, I have always felt that the UK is my second home. For me the word 'home' signifies a feeling of belonging, being part of a community both in terms of identity

formation (how I'm similar / or different). Gorman-Murray et al. (2008: 172) argue, that belonging involves 'an unfolding space of attachment, affiliation, and recognition.' Such a feeling of 'belonging' is also determined by one's position within a group and one's access to power (Yuval- Davis 2006). According to Yuval-Davis, belonging extends beyond one's sense of identity and social location, it is also about how people experience and respond towards their attachments and how they feel such attachments may be judged by others.

My fieldwork coincided with the Brexit process, signaled by former prime minister David Cameron's announcement of June 23rd as the date for a referendum regarding the country's membership of the European Union. Since its announcement in February 2016, government ministers were urged to declare their support or disapproval of such a motion and support either the 'remain' or 'leave' campaigns. The positive Brexit vote - with a total of 51.9% voting Leave in contrast to 48.1% voting Remain, led to an increase in uncertainty about the economic prospects of the UK as well as raised new concerns about notions of citizenship. I remember that during one of our research coffee-chats, one of my participants asked me how I felt about Brexit and whether I had experienced any changes in my daily life. I explained how for the first time after twelve years, in the weeks following the referendum, I was cautious of speaking Greek on the phone when on the metro. I would walk around Newcastle city centre and my eye would fall on people holding signs 'Go Back Home' or wear pins with the word 'Brexit' on them.

I realised that for the first time after all these years, I felt unwanted, and in some cases, not safe. He half joked as he said, 'It's funny how about the time I get my visa you might need to leave.' Such a comment highlighted the feeling of 'unsettlement' I had been experiencing since June 2016<sup>8</sup>. Such a subjective experience allowed me to become more aware of feelings of precarity in relation to citizenship as experienced by participants but also offered me a different insight into the idea of being denied one's biographical trajectory in terms of how policies and legislations may challenge and even marginalise individuals' livelihoods and force them to review their story of belonging. In my case, it made me reflect the extent to which I belong in the UK and in the case of my participants it related to the fact that their identities as asylum seekers clashed with their national identities and pre-existing identities as individuals who have led full lives.

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<sup>8</sup> For an interesting discussion on the dynamics of belonging of European Union (EU) nationals living in the United Kingdom (UK) during the Brexit negotiations see Ranta and Nancheva's (2018) paper *Unsettled: Brexit and European Union nationals' sense of belonging*.

For a previous draft, I was revising this section three days before the initial legal date of 29 March 2019 during which the United Kingdom was initially legally scheduled to withdraw from the European Union. Interestingly, my initial concerns and insecurities have been replaced by a refusal to feel unwanted and instead focus on all the positive experiences that have made my life in the UK so rich and so meaningful. I have also realised how my sense of belonging in relation to my research has shifted. When I first set foot within the research landscape of refugee studies, I remember battling feelings of inadequacy and the need to read everything out there in order to 'catch up.'

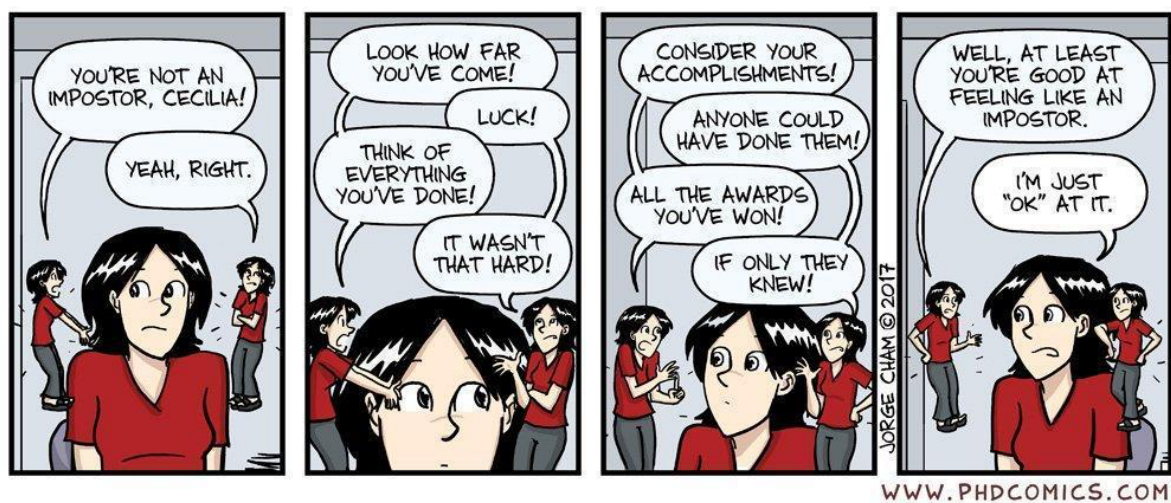


Figure 24: Comic representation of impostor syndrome via PHD COMICS.

Such a feeling is still present - perhaps some days to a lesser extent - always lurking and ready to sneak in causing me to question my value and abilities. I have discussed this with many fellow PhD students, and we all reach to the conclusion that we 'suffer' from impostor syndrome. According to Harvey and Katz (1984: 3), the impostor phenomenon is a 'psychological syndrome or pattern. It is based on intense, secret feelings of fraudulence in the face of success and achievement.' Figure 24 is an insightful visualization of the myriad thought-cycles I have become immersed into during the past three and a half years.

During a collage-making workshop I had the opportunity to create a collage about my experiences as a researcher. Joining a group of twelve post-graduate researchers and led by a visiting research fellow in the Department of Anthropology we were invited to respond to the invitation of the question: Who am I, in my research? The question could be answered in three different ways: 1) Who am I? 2) in my research? and finally 3) Who am I, in my research?

During the workshop I produced the following collage (Figure 25) as a reflective piece exploring my research experiences and my identity as a researcher, as well as employing the collage as a form of elicitation in order to critically reflect with my own research area (Butler- Kisber and Poldma 2010). There are (at least) three ways of 'reading' my collage. In responding to the question in all three configurations it serves as a synthesis of the different areas of research with which I have engaged, my position within my research and also who I am as a young researcher. The collage can be separated into two main areas: left and right although some images traverse the boundaries of such a division. This is not accidental; on the contrary it symbolises the interdisciplinary nature of my research as well as my positioning across different disciplines. On the left bottom-hand corner, the wooden frame corresponds to the idea of time constraints and limited access as symbolised by the woman's eye. This refers to my appreciation that my research can only be partial and is focusing on a particular moment in time. The young blonde girl is positioned in front of the frame and is therefore an outsider who has been granted access. In many ways the girl refers to my experience of feeling inadequate - I catch myself still describing myself as a 'baby researcher' especially in front of more established academics. The image of a woman sitting in child pose in the right side of the piece is another visual echo of such a feeling.



Figure 25: Autobiographical collage piece entitled 'My Research Journey'.

Nevertheless, as I complete this investigation, I resist this process of self-infantilisation and aim to proactively remain confident on the contribution of my work. A deeper look at this collage allows me to see how its right side serves as an amalgamation of different visual motifs and dominant stories and representational frames *about* and *for* individuals seeking asylum. It aims to critically reflect on the role of such stories and how they become charged with particular ideologies and assumptions. The bird positioned on the right bottom-hand corner of the collage 'plays' on the idea of birds as symbols of displacement echoing the idea of migratory routes, but also bringing into focus the interplay between 'choice' and 'force' and questioning how choice becomes co-constructed within the asylum-seeking storytelling practice. Additionally, the image of the wooden box with the word 'fragile' introduces dominant discourses around vulnerability, victimhood and fragility but also forces one to think about the value of human lives. The notion of individuals as 'precious' human cargo can also be read in relation to the transactional nature of forced migration and the socioeconomic factors that come into place when exploring human anguish such as human trafficking and organised people-smuggling. The empty boat emphasises the need to question *what* is missing from stories and *why*, and also *how* do we frame stories and for *whom*?

As I was creating my collage and subsequently writing down a title and a description of it, I remember feeling as if the collage had teased out additional questions and stories for me to revisit. In writing this reflective piece I am reminded of the potential of visual methods and in this case auto-ethnography to not only create new data (Vaughan 2004) but also to advance understanding (Finley 2008) and allow for a suspension of 'linear thinking and allow elusive qualities of feelings and experiences to be addressed tangibly' (Davis and Butler- Kisber 1999: 1). I created this collage during the time I was completing my first journal article (Stavropoulou 2019). My decision to title it 'Understanding the 'bigger picture': Lessons learned from participatory visual arts-based research with individuals seeking asylum in the United Kingdom', reflects my analytical shift in trying to understand the 'bigger picture' of my research and the analytical richness of my data on various levels: move beyond narrative/imagination; images/words and stories/audience, individual/social and accept that they are both distinct as well as inter-connected and that they are all integral elements of the process of self-representation and therefore integral to processes of analysis and interpretation.

### 3.11 Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of this investigation, there are many ethical considerations to address, most importantly the dynamics of power in the interviewer-interviewee relationship, effects on participant's official status and their psychological wellbeing. Apart from ethical obligations towards interviewees in relation to confidentiality and anonymity, honesty and openness about the study are crucial to this study (Rubin and Rubin 1995: 101). Respect and 'ethics of care' (Plummer 2000), were embedded in both this study's methodological apparatus and relationship with participants throughout all phases: observation, creative sessions, interviews, debriefing, analysis, and discussion.

#### *Negotiating access*

Early onto my fieldwork, I was introduced to participants by gatekeepers, most commonly individuals who supported or delivered core services at the organisations I collaborated with. Their knowledge of my study and their connections with different individuals proved extremely beneficial as they were able to identify individuals who might be particularly interested in my research i.e. individuals who identified as artists, researchers, photographers or activists, and in general individuals who were quite vocal about their experiences of seeking asylum. Working with gatekeepers also meant that I had someone to contact and inform if I was worried about a participant as well as to sought their advice on how to better support individuals throughout our research encounter.

There were however some issues with this approach that should be acknowledged alongside the benefits of relying on gatekeepers to support participant recruitment. As I experienced during my fieldwork, some gatekeepers tried to gain control over the research process in terms of the suggested methodology due to organisational concerns over the service users' safety and anonymity. As a response to such concerns, I adopted a full disclosure policy according to which I provided an outline of the research project's focus, aims and objectives, as well as plans for dissemination, which were also outlined in the consent release forms. In some cases, I adapted the methodology to allow participants themselves to determine their level of participation, as I did not want to 'victimise' or infantilise them by deciding on their behalf whether something would be traumatic or not; the choice should be theirs to make. Alternatively, some organisations tried to incorporate my research project as part of their service's marketing strategy (i.e. website consent). In one case, I had to decline their suggestion for the interviews

to be part of the project's website, as I did not want the intention to shape the tone of the interviews.

During my third year, I had the privilege to work as part of a collective of women researchers reflecting on our personal experiences of conducting participatory. Our collaboration resulted in a co-authored journal article (see Lenette et al 2019) titled *Brushed under the carpet: Examining the complexities of participatory research (PR)*. The article served as an opportunity for myself to reflect on the importance of finding a balance between respecting and recognising the role of gatekeepers in securing access without nevertheless sacrificing the integrity and autonomy of my research by accepting their 'terms and conditions'. Instead, the research process should be led by participants' needs, interests and identified issues and not to be predetermined by organisational aims and marketing strategies.

#### *Psychological wellbeing, risk and re-visiting traumatic experiences*

An important ethical consideration of participatory research is the potential impact on participants' psychological wellbeing. Such a risk is even greater when engaging in research of forced displacement as many individuals seeking asylum may be experiencing serious psychological trauma due to their difficult journeys and the reality of having to adjust to a new social reality (Vaughan-Williams 2015). There is therefore a legitimate concern that the re-telling of one's story can result in re-traumatisation through having to relive experiences of loss, trauma and stress (Miller 2000). Moreover, asking participants to re-tell their stories – given that their future rests significantly on such a storytelling process as part of their asylum claims, may also rekindle negative memories or even act as an exclusionary factor.

The decision to conduct ethnographic research carries its own important ethical questions. The most important one being, 'Is this research really necessary?' as to conduct ethnographic research involves a considerable amount of participants' time, possibly experiencing intimate facets of their everyday lives, asking various questions, as well as completing prolonged observation of their behaviours and practices. It is therefore important to be transparent and clear about the benefits accrued by research participants or involved groups, as well as to clearly outline the rationale of the research from the beginning of the research relationship. Due to the 'intrusive' nature of such a methodology, researchers are ethically responsible for making moral judgements over the balance of harm and benefit and to prioritise participants' well-being when affected by the 'burden' of having to participate in research.

Concerns over the well-being of participants also relates to their assumed 'vulnerability' and their 'right to participate.' In some cases, exposing participants to particular questions or issues could also expose them to risks they would not otherwise have experienced. On the other hand, to exclude participants from the research due to their assessed 'vulnerability' could limit their access to 'normal' social relations, customs and activities that other members of such a group may enjoy. An ethical approach would instruct to have good reason for inclusion/exclusion and not to ignore or avoid engaging with some participants for research convenience or because it would be difficult to include those individuals (Iphofen 2013).

According to Powles (2004), sharing of personal experiences can be beneficial to those telling their stories. Sharing one's story has the potential to be empowering and allow one to 'unburden themselves' (2004: 17-20). Especially in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, it can serve as a 'sign that their experiences and perspectives do matter within a humanitarian system that tends to appear otherwise. Moreover, it can help refugees be more aware of the social and political roots of their suffering, to give them a sense of their own agency and to claim the right to be heard' (ibid). Research into refugee experiences of integration have outline how socializing, developing friendships and sharing experiences with members of the host community can support a stronger sense of belonging (Ager & Strang 2004; Hebing 2009).

Many participants told me of terrible experiences that had happened to them, including rape, physical violence and verbal abuse. As they recounted their stories some became increasingly upset while others cried. During those moments I sometimes cried with them and continued to listen as they went on recounting their stories. Despite given the option to stop or take a break, all participants chose to complete their interviews and thanked me in the end for the opportunity to share their stories - because as one participant explained, 'it is important to know someone cares' (Fieldwork notes). Following completion of the interviews I would always ensure there was time for debriefing as well as I would follow up as and when necessary, with members of partnering organisations, especially if they had supported participant recruitment as I realised their role of responsibility and concerns towards participants' wellbeing.

Following Atkinson's (1998: 28) recommendations I would always work towards ensuring that participants were informed about the aims and objectives of my study, always request their

permission to record our interviews and /or take notes at the start of our meeting and aim to find a relaxing and comfortable interview setting. In order to create an encouraging interview space, I would allow enough time from first meeting participants to arranging an interview. Additionally, in some cases we would meet before an interview had been scheduled in order to discuss the process, my study's aims and objectives and my plans for dissemination. If meeting in person was not possible, such a rapport was established by telephone or texts- whatever was most convenient for participants (see also Hebing 2009: 71).

When possible, I would work towards acquiring some understanding of the participant's background prior to the interviews and/or follow up sessions. That involved talking to other gatekeepers or fellow participants as well as conducting research about that individual's home country in order to become familiar with their country's socio-political and cultural affiliations (see also Hebing 2009: 71-72). Such information was useful especially when conducting co-analysis as part of the interviews, as it allowed us to collaboratively unlock new stories and supported participant-led reflection.

#### *Expectations and my responsibility towards participants*

By setting the goal to change the world, not simply study it (Stanley 1990: 15; Marx 1888), participatory research is recognised by many researchers as a rejection and a reaction to traditional research models that tend to see individuals and communities as 'objects of study' rather than collaborators (Lake and Wendland 2018: 18). When engaging in participatory research it is important to reflect on how one's work is problem-focused as well as context-sensitive, and continuously aiming to improve the lives of the communities they engage with.

As I progressed with my fieldwork, I became aware of the responsibility placed upon me as a researcher engaging with experiences of forced displacement and the need to highlight and honour such stories. In particular, it made me reflect on the actual 'power' I had in terms of disseminating knowledge and finding new audiences (academic, public) for such stories as well as my limitations. As Banks et al (2013) recognise, it can be quite hard to negotiate between different roles (i.e. researcher/activist) and in many occasions I've felt as if I'm occupying both roles when talking in public about my findings. To acquire such a role introduces new unexpected challenges such as the realisation that your power as a researcher/activist may be limited in relation to improving participants' daily living conditions.

Throughout my fieldwork there were times when I questioned the potential impact of inviting individuals to critique the asylum granting system without them being able to practically influence the course of their asylum claims. Such a reality was always communicated to potential participants in order to ensure that I was straightforward and honest with them and to manage their expectations of my research. Moreover, coming to such a realisation of the limitations of my role also helped me reflect on my internalised 'saviour' complex (see Cole 2002) and allowed me to revisit and challenge my understanding of my relationship with participants in order to be aware of how such a sense of desire to help can unavoidably reinstate power hierarchies and therefore requires continuous revision and self-reflection. It was important for myself as a researcher to understand that my role was not to 'save anyone'. First of all, I couldn't do so and more importantly, no one 'needed' to be saved. To treat them in such a way would result in my act of reinforcing the dominant logic of seeing and treating asylum seekers as 'vulnerable victims'. I knew I could listen, offer my attention and my support but I could not change the asylum determination process.

#### *Consent and information*

In line with establishing a research environment of care, mutual trust, accountability, and respect, I invested time in discussing the research project with each potential participant explaining the process, objectives, outcomes and my future plans regarding dissemination. I created project posters as well as an information sheet and consent release forms with different options (e.g. agreeing to be interviewed and/or agreeing to share visual material). I prepared an example of two workshop structures and a project brief that was distributed to all involved organisations/gatekeepers and had one-to-one meetings with them in order to address any concerns, questions and discuss ideas around our collaboration (Appendices 1 & 2, p. ). As I was aware of language barriers that might impact participants' interpretation of the information, I consulted the 'Plain English' handbook as a standard for copy for all project-related material, and tried to only use simple and straightforward language during our conversations.

#### *Confidentiality, anonymity and ethics of visibility and images*

Protecting participants' identities and ensuring that they felt safe during the research process was one of my most important ethical concerns. Since most participants were going through the asylum process, I was aware that participants worried about the kind of information they disclosed and whether that could impact their case negatively. Additionally, for participants who had fled their countries due to political persecution, marital abuse or human trafficking,

keeping their identities confidential was fundamental to their personal safety and therefore we used pseudonyms as a safety mechanism.

Anonymity emerged as another facet of participation as various participants preferred to be named as they were interested in having their expertise recognised. Participants who preferred not to be anonymous were also the same participants who were eager to be visible and provided visual material that could lead to identification. In contrast, individuals who preferred to remain anonymous were also the same individuals whose visual products revealed a partial representation of themselves or photographs of objects, places and abstract ideas that did not reveal any information about their appearance. In order to ensure anonymity of all participants, all participants have been given pseudonyms. Especially when employing visual methodologies, it is important to consider any potential harm towards participants. Prosser et al (2008) argue about the necessity for both participants and researchers to agree on some fundamental ethical principles and practices when engaging in image-based research both in terms of visibility as well as emotional impact; as some images might reflect negative or traumatic experiences. It is important however to note that the inclusion of visual methods, provided insights into complex meaning-making processes that may have not been easily articulated in a solely narrative interview context.

As outlined in my earlier discussion on Photovoice, working with images when examining experiences of forced displacement carries myriad possibilities for change as well as ethical dilemmas. According to Lenette (2019: 158), participatory visual methods such as photo-voice have the potential to 'counter the damage caused by the often-exploitative and voyeuristic photographic representation of people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, especially in the media' (see also O'Neill 2010). Furthermore, such methods can readdress 'the *imbalance of representations*' (Lenette 2019: 158 original emphasis) and support the participant-led production of images that reflect the ways individuals would like to be seen. However, despite such possibilities, it is still difficult to completely eliminate the risk of voyeurism and spectatorship inherent to photography (Lenette 2019: 160; Foster 2016). As outlined in *Chapter 2*, photos and testimonials of refugees and asylum seekers may often become reproduced and presented in such ways that advance organisational aims including advocacy support and NGO's further reinforcing conceptions of 'victimhood' and 'vulnerability' (Haaken and O'Neill 2014: 84).

While thinking about the collection of the images of this thesis (i.e. participant-produced, sourced and self-produced) two central notions arise: those of context and purpose. The importance of both notions became clearer while reflecting on my use of Alan Kurdi's images as prompted by one of my supervisors. Interestingly, in a different dissemination context, while preparing a conference paper on the visual ethics of the 'European Refugee Crisis' I recall contemplating whether I should use the image of Alan Kurdi's body lying by the seashore. I remember thinking whether it would be unethical or 'too much' for my audience. What became clear to me however, was that to decide *not* to use it would be a mis-representation of the way the 'crisis' was reported and secondly, an erasure of Alan's tragic loss and the symbolic dimension of such an event. Within the context of my research, Alan Kurdi's image and more importantly his story was included as an act of recognition; an acknowledgement of a tragic event; and equally a reminder of the 'precarity' of images- even iconic ones that may become immortalised in our mind but whose potential to inspire systematic social change is short-lived.

According to Vaughn Wallace, former photo editor of Al Jazeera, it is important to look 'past the image' when asylum seekers and refugees are involved. 'Their stories don't end just where the photograph is taken. So, it is important to me to look for images that help promote the dignity of the subject beyond even the photograph.' In my research, such a commitment to dignity relates to participants' choice of images (produced and identified) that invite them to critique their situations and challenge dominant ways of seeing and talking *about* 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'.

#### *Recording and transcribing the data*

All of the one-to-one interviews were recorded through a voice recorder and an Apple iPhone Voice memos application to prevent any loss of data due to a potential technical issue. Audio files were immediately stored on a password-protected external hard drive and deleted from the recording devices. Once interviews and/or creative sessions were conducted with participants, the interviews were stored under a pseudonym with the date of the meeting and were kept separately from any identifying documents (e.g. release forms). As the interviews contained sensitive data regarding ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, no record of the participants name was kept alongside the data so there could not be any retracing. During the interviews, I decided I would not take any notes in order to maintain eye contact and remain engaged within the conversation. Instead, after the interviews I would write a summary of what had been exchanged, identify key themes and some initial reflections that I would revisit during

transcription. I gradually came to understand the process of transcription as an interpretive process, which guides the analysis towards a certain direction and therefore functions as a preliminary stage of analysis (Riessman 2008).

#### *Ownership and dissemination of data (presentations, publications and exhibitions)*

Although while completing my thesis I carry the responsibility of writing this research story I am aware that the stories which I've been generously offered by others do not 'belong' to me. I might be recounting them as part of my research but they 'belong' to the storytellers who kindly agreed to share them. Such an acknowledgement raises important considerations around ownership and dissemination and makes me realise of my role as a 'curator' of stories and knowledge. In curating research outputs, I am employing my 'specialist' skills and own aesthetics when selecting, presenting, and introducing participants' work. My role as a curator of knowledge was therefore accomplished through my process of coding, selecting and re-organising knowledge items within a particular learning context and presented in a specific way for specific audiences. I am therefore aware of how my curatorial viewpoint becomes influenced by my aim to highlight and raise awareness over such experiences, which nevertheless reestablishes my leading role as a researcher.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined my epistemological and methodological approach towards engaging with individuals' stories. Employing ethno-mimesis has allowed me to embrace interdisciplinarity and navigate across different epistemological spaces that not only support my critical understanding of storytelling acts but also invited participants to creatively (re)present their stories. Combining ethno-mimesis with symbolic interactionism better supported my understanding of individuals' interpretation of what it 'means' to be 'an asylum seeker/refugee'. Furthermore, a symbolic interactionist approach also supported my analysis of ethno-mimetic texts as powerful, multilayered visual testimonials of lived experience with symbolic and emotive significance. Ultimately, through adopting an intersectional lens I have been able to understand how individuals' interlocking identifications and personal experiences influence the way they interpret and respond to their new identities, while also serving as a reminder of how complex and different 'refugee' experiences are.

Adopting such a multi-faceted epistemological and methodological approach offers many positive attributes while also unlocking a range of ethical and practical challenges including the

extent of participation, risk/harm, power hierarchies, and consent, among others. My positionality as well as my personal and intellectual biography have been central in the development of my research as well as my ethno-mimetic approach. The latter has allowed me to combine my two professional passions: research and community arts engagement. Ultimately, my ethno-mimetic approach has supported the production of different kinds of data, which have facilitated a richer and more in-depth analysis of the different stories that individuals seeking asylum share as part of their exilic experiences.

## Chapter Four: Physical & Media Journeys

### 4.1 Khaled's Story

I met Khaled in my first PhD year in Durham, on a Saturday morning in November 2015, as part of a pilot phase mentoring project focused on partnering up newly arrived displaced individuals and Durham University students. At that time, I could not have known the important role that he would play as one of my principal participants, but most importantly as a valuable advisor and supporter. We would then meet again after six months, under completely different circumstances at a Costa coffee shop in Stockton Upon Tees, where he informed me that had successfully received his 'Leave to Remain' status and was now living in a one-bedroom apartment. This was the second house he had lived in as initially he was allocated a room in a shared house with eight people where he used to share a room with another Syrian. His new house was conveniently located in the centre of the city, a ten minute-walk from the train station, which was really useful as he had to catch a train to a different city every morning at 8.30am where he worked as an integration support officer supporting newly arrived Syrian families. Despite living so close he admitted always running late as he hated having to get up early in the morning, but he was getting better at getting up on time especially as his workload and responsibilities increased.

Khaled is now living in his own rented flat and has bought a new car that allows him to be independent and travel wherever he wants for work as well as for pleasure, as he regularly visits his friends back in Stockton. When asked whether he would stay in the North East or move to another city where his twin brother has relocated, he said that he was not sure of what the future holds and that he would take any opportunities that come his way as he has been doing for all this time, since he left his city Haas in Syria in 2014.

During our interview at his semi-detached house in June 2017, I noticed that he had started decorating his new place. There was a frame on the wall of the living room above the fireplace showing boats and people walking by. Khaled explained this is the first painting he had ever owned and it represents his arrival at a new place he now calls home. There were also many unpacked boxes and one large suitcase, as he was still in the process of moving in and apologised for the mess. As I checked through my notes in preparation for our interview, I could see him in the kitchen preparing a tray with two glasses of cranberry juice. He walked towards

the dining table in the living room and joked about the importance of hospitality in Syrian culture: 'We always take good care of our guests, it is in our culture'. He then sat opposite me in order to get comfortable and paused for a few seconds following my opening interview question of asking him to share with me his story of seeking asylum in the UK. It seems as if he was contemplating how to begin his story, which he then decided to share with me:

Before I start about my life in Syria I'd like to start about the life in general in Syria before the war. Syria was a modern country; we had everything. A very peaceful country. It was the second peaceful place in the world in 2010. In 2012 it was the worse, the most dangerous place in the world. Just in two years, from being the second peaceful place to the worse place. **(Interview response)**

Me, myself. I will talk about myself and also other people. We hadn't thought of leaving Syria before the war, except if we wanted to go for holidays maybe. But we don't because we have everything in Syria: warm weather, historical places, sea, forest. We had everything. Yes, so rarely we thought of leaving Syria for whatever reason. **(Interview response)**

Khaled comes from a middle-class family which owned a chain of thirteen clothing stores in Homs. Until the war, they enjoyed a comfortable life and had no plans of migrating to a different country. Even when his father suggested he study abroad he refused to do, so because he did not want to 'live his life outside Syria', but also due to his lack of English. Khaled and his twin brother Amir are the youngest members of his family. Khaled also has three older brothers who are all dispersed in different countries: Germany, Sweden and Denmark. His parents are still in Syria, where he hopes to return once the political situation has been resolved.

Khaled really misses the day-to-day interaction with his parents and brothers. He now uses free text and call applications such as WhatsApp and Viber, as well as social networking platforms such as Facebook, in order to stay in touch and maintain a close relationship with them. He is particularly close with his mother, whom he describes as the central force guiding his family, even now despite the distance, always looking after each one of them, and being a constant source of support throughout his childhood and especially during his journey to the UK.

We are very close, she is my best friend, really...Like for every single step she supported me. She is really supportive. For the money, they paid everything to give me the freedom. She didn't have anything more to pay, but they've done more than enough for me. She supported me with her words, prayers every day. She would call: 'Where are you now?' 'Are you ok?' She is a mum, you understand. **(Interview response)**

Khaled talks to his mother almost every day and relies on her for advice. As Khaled explained, having a mobile phone was a necessity throughout his journey as it allowed him to stay in touch with his family and send regular updates, access information such as google maps and closed Facebook groups with information on travel routes, as well as remaining able to contact key people who assisted him during his relocation. Equally, it served as a means of capturing his experience, producing visual souvenirs as well as testimonials/pieces of evidence. As he explained, he took photos of his bruised body following his arrest in Syria when the government tried to force him to enlist in the national army service. It was thanks to his parents' connections and financial support that he managed to get released and was able to flee to Lebanon, a neighbouring country.

Khaled, like many other Syrians, left his country due to the dangerous political situation. He first moved to another city where he stayed for twelve months and worked as a sales assistant in a clothing store. At that point, he thought that was a temporary solution but as the war continued and following his arrest by the government, he decided to flee to Lebanon where he stayed for fourteen months working illegally at a restaurant, washing dishes, and serving customers. He describes Lebanon as a 'dead-end' destination, as he could not stay there due to his illegal status and equally could not move forward as he had no money or passport. He further explains:

I couldn't stay in Lebanon because it was illegal and I was chased by the government and I couldn't go live somewhere else because I had no money or passport. So, I'm not allowed to stay, I'm not allowed to go back to Syria, I'm not allowed to go to another place. I think you can imagine how bad that situation was. **(Interview response)**

When thinking about his journey to the UK, Khaled describes his stay in Lebanon as the hardest part of his journey. This was due to the difficult living conditions and the traumatic experience of being kidnapped for which his family paid for his release. His family also paid for a fake passport, which allowed Khaled to flee to Europe by plane. He flew to Turkey, arriving at Ara city at 8.00AM in the morning, and then flying to Izmir, which he refers to as the start of his journey. Over a period of 37 days, he travelled across more than eight countries by boat, foot, train and vans, including: Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Germany, France and finally, the UK. He entered the UK after hiding on the Eurostar train. Following his arrival, Khaled was taken into a police station to give a statement, where he was also received by people from the Home Office. He was then asked different questions about himself, Syria and the reasons for which he had travelled to the UK. Khaled stayed in London for three days before he was sent to shared-accommodation facilities in Whitfield for ten days where he shared a room with two others. On June 13<sup>th</sup> he was sent to Stockton, a town in Northern England and one of the main dispersal locations across the North East region. He remained in Stockton for a year and a half, until he moved to a different city where he started working as an integration officer supporting newly arrived Syrian families.

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Khaled's story serves as a rich starting point for a reflective analysis of some of the key themes that will be explored in this chapter: first, the importance of researching refugee journeys and their impact on individuals' lives as periods of transition, revision and transformation. Secondly, this chapter foregrounds my analysis by introducing the notion of 'choice' as an analytical framework supporting my understanding of individuals reasons for leaving the different micro and macro factors that shape such 'forced choices'. Thirdly, it introduces participants' physical and media journeys with a focus on how their personal circumstances and access to particular resources allowed them to successfully complete their journeys. The final section provides insights into the role and necessity of smartphone technology and participants' personal use of social media as a platform to share stories of displacement and arrival.

Participants' stories are contextualised by mediated experiences of the 'European refugee crisis'. Therefore, there is an interesting analytical dialogue to be explored in relation to the

way in which such journeys having been captured in the public imagination through dominant discursive and media practices and the ways in which participants choose to recount their personal experiences. As a researcher, I strongly feel that it is not my role or ethical orientation to evaluate the 'legitimacy' of my research informants' accounts. Instead, I focus on examining the content and the relationship between the media sphere, social structures and narrative discourses to which their stories respond. I therefore understand Khaled's story as a subjective, individual account (See Jobe 2008) that seeks to provide a partial representation of experiences of forced displacement. Such an account acquires a particular universal narrative structure that responds and reproduces archetypal narratives of forced displacement both in terms of its structure as well as its thematic content. The following sections will revisit Khaled's interview responses as well as draw from other participants' stories in order to introduce this chapter's principal themes.

#### **4.2 Researching Refugee Journeys**

According to Mallet and Hagen-Zanker (2018: 341), research on refugee movements has long been conceptualised as a 'movement between two fixed points' (Triulzi and McKenzie 2013), an 'aspect of getting from A to B, whether these are geographical locations, immigration statuses, life stages, or migration stages such as settlement and integration' (Griffiths 2013: 1). With some exceptions, such as the work of BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Khosravi 2010, Kuschminder and Koser 2016 and Mainwaring and Brigden 2016, research on refugee experiences has traditionally focused on the causes and consequences of exile (before/after). Instead, BenEzer suggests an understanding of the journey 'as a period in itself, with specific meaning and significance for the rest of their lives' (2002: 9). Schapendonk (2012) also emphasizes the need to focus on 'what happens in between' (Mallet and Hagen-Zanker 2018: 341),

It is not so much beginnings (the A) and endings (the B) that matter, but rather the in-between, the trajectory itself ... The spatial evolution of a trajectory influences the continuation of the same trajectory. (Schapendonk 2012: 39)

Apart from being an important transitional period, the concept of journey is also a powerful analytical tool in understanding how individuals negotiate displacement as it allows a multitude of analytical possibilities:

As a conceptual construct; as a physical process; as a historical event; as a symbolic episode; as a metaphorical and material expression and representation of the exilic process; as the distinctive indicator of refugeehood; as a transformative experience involving immense personal and social upheaval (BenEzer and Zeter 2014: 305).

It is within such a multi-layered conceptual framework that this analysis is located, starting with the different phases of the exilic process: introducing the physical process of displacement (*Chapter 4*); moving into understandings of a second-phase journey as part of the asylum determination process (*Chapter 5*); and finally, as a personal third-phase journey of resettlement (*Chapter 6*). The concept of journey therefore emerges as a metaphor for understanding exilic experiences as well as a helpful structuring device.

In developing this structuring metaphor, I have drawn on an extensive body of literature on the relocation process as experienced by forcibly displaced individuals, which identifies three key stages: pre-migration, in transit, and post migration (Bhugra and Jones 2001; Keyes and Kane 2004). During pre-migration live in their home country and are preparing for their departure (Bhugra and Jones 2001), leading to the middle stage of being in transit during which individuals travel across different in search for another country where they can seek asylum and may spend time in camps before they reach a final destination. The final phase of their journey involves the stage of post migration during which individuals are relocated to a host country, where they experience the legal process of having their claim of asylum recognised. The final stage also involves a process of integration in new communities and in particular involves becoming familiar with new cultural and social frameworks.

The process of resettlement is often associated with high levels of distress as individuals may experience anxiety, social isolation, poverty, identity confusion (national vs refugee identity), lack of cultural community as well as financial constraints, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, and loss of important life projects (See Keyes and Kane 2004; Khawaja et al. 2008). Equally this stage also allows for new understandings of belonging and individual re-interpretations of their life-experiences before, during and after their journeys, while also serving as 'preparatory time' in order to be able to 'move on' with their lives once they accomplish status acquisition (Rotter 2016). In engaging with narratives of exilic journeys, it is important to examine the reasons for leaving their home countries, which invite us to engage

with the complexities of migrant decision-making as well as to problematize the notion of 'choice' and the factors influencing destination preferences.

#### **4.3 Deciding to Leave: Force or Choice?**

When considering experiences of forced displacement, the idea of 'choice' is quite a contentious one (Crawley 2016: 5). As Crawley and Hagen-Zaker (2018: 21) observe, migrant decision-making is a dynamic process that is 'influenced by a complex reaction of macro, meso and micro level factors.' These include economic, political, social and cultural resources that individuals have access to such as social networks, financial capital, access to information, language skills, as well as particular demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, family status) (Mallet and Hagen-Zanker 2018).

Bourdieu's (1985) concept of social and financial capital is particularly helpful when examining participants' decision-making processes and the contributing factors that shape, prevent and allow such choices. Bourdieu defines social capital as 'the sum of resources, actual or virtual that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119). Possession of social capital can therefore determine one's ability to move on as well as the conditions of such a journey. Social capital is often interlinked to financial capital as social networks can provide financial assistance either through family structures, friends' networks or even 'travel companions' alongside whom they complete their journeys (Mallet and Hagen-Zanker 2018: 347).

The notion of forced displacement is impregnated with a sense of imposed urgency. It is an interesting notion to unpack in relation to how the word 'forced' presupposes a lack of choice and therefore reinforces dominant legal and media narrative tropes around forced and voluntary displaced communities. The distinction between forced and voluntary migration, highlights the problematic tendency to rely on 'oppositional typologies to categorise different groups and experiences: skilled-unskilled; temporary-permanent; and (...) forced-voluntary.' It is therefore important to identify the social structures that produce and shape human actions, in order to recognise the potential of individual agency, which should be understood as 'the capabilities of human beings' (Gregory 2000: 350).

The notion of 'choice' also serves as an analytical bridge to examine wider theoretical debates on structure and agency in relation to forced displacement. Moreover, it draws attention to the relationship between structure and agency, allowing an understanding of how agents and structures mutually enact social systems and how social systems become part of such a duality (Stryker 2008). Acquiring an understanding of social structures as patterned interactions and relationships between social agents can better support my analysis of how individuals construct and interpret their stories of 'forced choice' in response to social structures and internalised meanings of the 'authentic refugee'.

Sewell (1992) suggests an understanding of agency that recognises its relational properties:

To be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degrees of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree. (Sewell 1992: 20).

A voluntarist, agent-oriented perspective argues that individuals are in charge of the ways in which they behave (Hays 1994). On the other hand, a structuralist approach would presuppose that social beings operate in accordance with social structured patterns. According to Sewell (1992), however, the term cannot be adequately defined:

Structure operates in social scientific discourse as a powerful metonymic device identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole. It is a word to conjure within the social sciences. In fact, structure is less a precise concept than a kind of founding epistemic metaphor of social scientific – and scientific- discourse (Sewell 1992: 2).

Sewell identifies two important issues in understanding the metaphor of structure: first, the tendency to understand social structures, for example cultural norms as rigid and beyond the reach of human agency, making it seem as if they are shaping social agents' interactions; and second, the lack of understanding of how patterns of human interaction change over time which leads to issues in accounting for how social change occurs within the system (Sewell 1992: 2-3). The relationship between agency and structure has been the subject of much debate in social sciences (Giddens 1984; Archer 1995). An important figure in this debate is Anthony Giddens whose theory of structuration suggests an understanding of structure as both 'the

medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organize' (Giddens 1984: 25). Giddens highlights duality as he argues that social structures constrain as well as enable actions. Therefore, although their actions become constrained, people's agency ensures that social actors always preserve some degree of freedom.

Giddens' structuration theory has been critiqued extensively due to its agent-structure duality. For example, Margaret Archer (1995) challenges Giddens' dualism and instead suggests that each pole needs to be treated separately and on its own terms in order to adequately understand their interrelationship. According to Archer, agents and structures are distinct, and neither has primacy over the other. To understand the relationship between the two, she proposes a 'morphogenic approach':

The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgment that society has no pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities. (Archer 1995: 5)

According to Archer, processes of change occur for both agents and structures in interlocking and complex ways. Agents are shaped by a set of existing social structures (e.g. power relationships, language, norms) and equally across time social structures change as a result of the activities, choices, and interactions of social actors. In other words, individuals are socially constituted and socially situated; their actions, motivations and stories are shaped by their social surroundings. This acknowledgement is particularly useful in my work in relation to understanding how individuals present themselves to others and how their stories allow them to construct particular subjectivities that respond, reinforce or challenge social structures. Within the process of displacement, the notion of choice is particularly interesting as it sits within a matrix of expectations around legal requirements/classification, public opinions, political manifestos and humanitarian narratives that all address the notion of 'choice' in different ways. Notions of choice, reasons for leaving one's country, as well as participants' characteristics such as gender, age or ethnicity, among others, are important in understanding how journeys are experienced differently by individuals seeking asylum.

### 4.3. Situations in One's Home Country and the 'Decision' To Leave

Despite narrating a similar experience (that of 'forceful' displacement), participants' situations and subjective accounts differed extensively. Participants shared a range of reasons for which they were forced to flee including political persecution, gendered violence, civil war, sexual abuse or sexual orientation persecution. All participants emphasized the urgency of having to leave as to remain in their countries was understood as a direct threat to their lives.

Many male participants explained that they were forced to flee due to political persecution or military enforcement - both reasons 'recognisable' vis-à-vis Refugee law. For most Syrians the decision to leave Syria was due to the ongoing war conflict. Similarly to Khaled, thousands of Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon. Khaled remained in Lebanon where he worked for a few months. While living in Lebanon, Khaled experienced racism and constant surveillance from the police and was forced to work under terrible conditions,

I told you about the army and the security, [of how] you are being looked. To check you, to see if you have legal documents and the work atmosphere over there [in Lebanon] was very horrible. Even when we worked, sometimes they would not give us our wages. You can't do anything about that, you can't complain, you can't go to the police, guard. No, you can't explain. Every day was horrible. **(Interview response)**

Aayansh from Sri Lanka had to leave his hometown due to continuous human rights abuse following the end of the civil war in 2009. He managed to escape with his wife and two sons to the UK where he is still in the process of seeking asylum. As he explains, people who fight for the 'truth and common good' such as journalists, opposition politicians, and lawyers are under constant threat. During one of our conversations, Aayansh presented a painting he had created at home as a response to his experience of seeking asylum.



Figure 26: Untitled. Participant produced drawing in his personal time.

Figure 26 shows a mother holding her child as they wave goodbye to the father. As Aayansh explained, this is a memorable image from back home:

I grew up with these images. You see the mother and child are waving goodbye. The father is going to the army to fight. Many friends went to fight in the civil war. The soil is yellow but the sky is blue because it symbolises heaven where the father will go. Because they know he will not return home to them.

**(Photo-elicitation response)**

Farhad, who is originally from Iran, explained how he left his country due to being persecuted because of his religious beliefs as he explained that Christians who are targeted by jihadists face three options: convert to Islam, pay a survival tax or face death. For Lucas, it wasn't a 'choice' to leave his country rather it became one due to a misunderstanding that resulted in his imprisonment:

Actually, it is not for me it wasn't a choice. What happened was that I was at University working as a librarian. I was still concerned about the problems that the students were facing, been a student at the same university and

working at the library I knew exactly what was going on. There was a protest at University and they accused me of organising the protest, but this wasn't the case. It was the students that came up to me. I was just a guy working at the IT department and assisting the library, so I told them if you have any concerns you should go to talk someone who is responsible like the head of the University. This is how I got arrested and I was in prison. In prison I got very sick so they took me to the hospital, but it was still jail, I was only in hospital because I needed treatment for my condition which was deteriorating. So in a way they couldn't keep me in prison. So, it is only from the hospital that I managed to escape with the help of my family. **(Interview response)**

The majority of female participants explained that they left their countries due to family abuse as well as marital or sexual abuse, whereas only two female participants from the core sample (12 participants), sought asylum on the grounds of political persecution. As Pittaway and Bartolomei (2001: 23) write, 'women, more than men, are subjected to double or multiple manifestations of human rights violation.' Narratives of physical and sexual abuse within the domestic and social sphere, were prominent amongst female participant accounts, outlining a greater exposure to gender-based violence.

For example, Lina from Albania, explained that if she went back to Albania she would 'most definitely be killed' as her husband-to-be in the UK proved to be involved in trafficking and threatened her life if she attempted to escape. Equally, Meru who is also from Albania, explained that she left her hometown with her two children as she was sexually and physically abused by her husband over a number of years and managed to escape thanks to her older brother's financial support. Another female participant from Pakistan, Naira fled to the UK as her family threatened to kill her when she chose to marry a man who was deemed of a lower social rank than her. Together with her husband they left Pakistan and arrived in the UK where they are still in the process of seeking asylum.

Other female participants explained that their request for asylum was due to political persecution. Azadeh and her family left Iran during the beginning of the Iranian revolution as her father had been targeted by the government. Another participant, Una, left Albania in 2014 due to political prosecution as she was targeted by the government due to her journalistic work.

As she explained: 'It wasn't safe for me anymore. My life was under threat and thanks to my family's support and our connections, I managed to leave Albania.

Leyla and her husband left their home country, Iran, due to religious persecution as they were targeted by the government due to her husband's political engagement. She drew the following image (Figure 27) as part of a series of creative sessions showing herself holding what looks like a flag, made from her hijab that no longer covers her hair. In her own words:

In my country we had many difficult situations. We had pollution, poverty, unemployment and very strict religion. I was always afraid back home, here I feel safe You see I've made a new flag with my hijab, my hair is free against the wind. **(Photo-elicitation response)**



Figure 27: Untitled. Drawing produced by participant during creative session.

Fatima, who is originally from Syria also explained how she was forced to flee because of the war in Syrian and the dangerous living conditions it brought in its wake. She explained how her drawing symbolises her emotional state: 'My country is still asleep, waiting for the sunrise.' Fatima's image portrays a woman's figure appearing behind a palm tree, which as she explains is one of Syria's national trees (Figure 28).

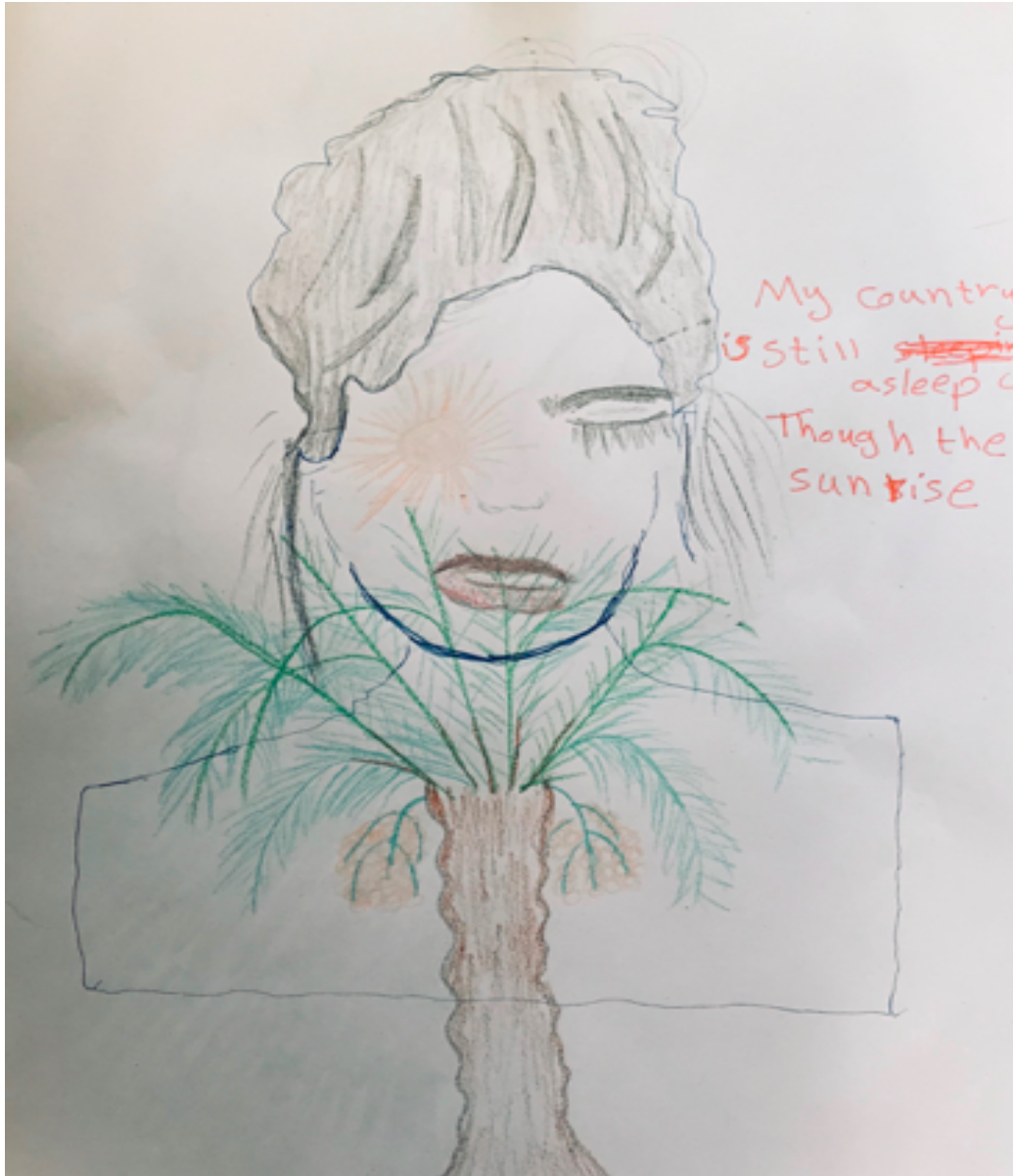


Figure 28: Untitled. Drawing produced by participant during creative workshops.

As she explained, the woman's right eye appears shut as she is asleep because her country is still immersed in ongoing war and conflict. Instead of a left eye we can see a bright sun which highlights the possibility of 'waking up' and the hope that her country will also be able to rise again and restore its former glory. As she explained: 'Her [right] eye is shut and the second one

is the sun. The beautiful sun in my country when we were free. The tree is part of our country's land. She is sleeping now but I hope she wakes up soon.' **(Photo-elicitation response)**

Azadeh's experiences are different to those of other participants in this study, as she and her family claimed asylum in a different historical and sociopolitical moment. Azadeh and her family arrived to the UK in the late 1970's following threats to her family because of her father's strong activist work in Iran. As she explains it was a sudden transition:

Me and my sister we did not want to leave. We were crying and we were saying 'Dad we don't want to go', and my dad was saying 'It's not safe, we need to go.' Because they opposed the regime of Shah and then they opposed the revolution. My family did not believe in religion, they believed in nature and human spirit. We weren't religious at all, so that was a huge obstacle as well as speaking out. My dad always spoke out. So...we left. But at the end, I think everything has a reason, it never stops, you are always walking with those shoes. (...) You become like that if you are from a country like that you know. Everybody is political, they can't not know about politics, and you understand when something is wrong and have to say something. **(Interview response)**

Reasons for leaving one's country differed between male and female participants; most female participants experienced individualized, gender-based violation whereas most male participants experienced conflict-induced mass displacement or political persecution. Gender not only impacts reasons for fleeing, but also influences asylum determination and protection processes as outlined in further sections. Building on our understanding of differences in participants' 'forced choices', the following section will examine participants' social capital in relation to access to resources, social connections and knowledge of final destinations.

#### **4.4 Refugee Journeys: Resources & Destination**

For all of the people sharing their stories as part of this research project, their journey to the UK began the moment they decided to leave their homes and travel to a different country. Some participants explained that they had 'no choice' but to leave. For the majority of participants, such a 'forced choice' was made together with other family members. Nevertheless, it was also a constructed choice defined by each participant's access to economic power, language skills and their physical state. As Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2018: 22-22) note, social networks (i.e

family, friends, agents, smugglers) are an important determining factor as such networks mediate relationships between individuals and communities as well as determine the social, political and economic parameters in which such decisions are framed.

As established in Khaled's vignette, his journey was supported by his family as they were able to send him money for a new passport as well as finance his journey to the UK. His family was also responsible for connecting him with agents who offered him all necessary information about how to traverse across different countries. Family support –financial, emotional as well as access to information was therefore an important resource for most participants. Similarly, Ibrahim from Eritrea, explained how his mother financed his journey while his uncle took care of all arrangements as he had connections with people in different cities and 'knew who to talk to':

He took care of everything and my mother helped me pack. It was hard to say goodbye but it was the only way. He gave me the name and address of the person I had to meet. He would take me across the border. **(Interview response)**

Meru also described how she relied on her family's connections as she 'did not know where to start from.' Equally, Lucas explained how his family was also responsible for planning and financing his journey:

No, it wasn't a long process. From the hospital we left and my uncle was there with his friend so they took me to one of the biggest cities because where I was working is a poor place not a big city. So they took me to Dwala which is like the capital of Cameroon so from there it was a lady who arranged everything. So we went and bought some second-hand clothes and they took me to big city. From there to the airport (Dwala), I arrived in France the next day I think it was midnight and arrived in France early morning. So, in France I am not sure how many hours we stayed in transit but from France we went to Edinburgh. **(Interview response)**

For the majority of participants, their exilic process was experienced as an ultimatum as they did not feel like there was an option of returning to their home-countries. This was particularly

evident in cases of individualised gender-based violence. This was not, however, the case for this study's Syrian participants, as all of them expressed both a desire and a hope that the situation in Syria will improve and that they will eventually return to their home towns. For example, Khaled described how he left Syria without a passport as he thought it would only be for a 'few days or a few months and then we would go back to our homes.'

I did not think to have the passport before because I had no money and because I thought, like all Syrian people think, that it was only going to be a few days or a few months and then we would go back to our homes. But I realised when ISIS started to join the war and different countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia. Many countries joined the war so it had become very complicated. So, I thought I knew it would not change in the short future- if I can say short future. So, I decided to leave, just seeking safety. Just to make sure I would be safe, in a safe place until I could go back to my country and be reunited with my people. **(Interview response)**

While narrating his journey to the UK, Youssef also explained how he had assumed his family's decision to flee to Turkey would be temporary:

When we left Syria, the plan was to go to Turkey for a while, as tourists. So, the plan was kind of to go out, wait for things to chill out for a while, one month. So, I didn't even say bye to anyone, my friends, my family, none of them I didn't see them, just my family and we got in the car. No, I just saw one friend, and said 'I'll see you in one month'. Shit, I didn't see him in one month. It's been one year and one month, but we are still talking. He's not my friend he is my cousin, he is still in Syria now. **(Interview response)**

The notion of a temporary relocation challenges media narratives according to which individuals are targeting Europe's welfare by choosing to relocate long-term to richer countries. In contrast to the main asylum-seeking route, individuals who have been offered humanitarian protection through the governmental scheme are primarily recognised by the UNHCR as 'eligible' for such a scheme: 'It prioritised people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk.' (Home Office 2017). This

idea of a 'temporary stay' is therefore underpinned by a temporal hospitality and a timed welcome that extends up to five years.

Time and temporality are equally integral parts of the migration experience, especially in relation to temporalities of subjectivities during 'decision making' moments but also in terms of how these different stages of displacement are conceptualised and experienced. Youssef's use of the word 'tourist' is also interesting - both in terms of its meaning, as well as its connection to the audience of this conversation, which was me. The word not only highlights the assumed temporariness of the relocation process, but also offers insights into the process of belonging and the living conditions of Youssef's stay in Turkey. Youssef described his stay in Turkey as a carefree period of transition, during which he was working illegally at a garage while also felt part of a strong Syrian community due to the high numbers of displaced Syrians in Istanbul.

For many participants like Youssef, their sudden departures involved a process of being uprooted without enough time for them to be able to say goodbye to family and friends, as well as an inadequate understanding of what exactly was happening when they left their homes. Such an observation seems to support BenEzer and Zetter's (2015) argument about the differences between the physical and the mental separation from one's home. For some of the participants, the life-changing realisation of embarking on a journey became clearer past the moment of departure, which meant they could have not anticipated the effects it would have on both an individual and community level. While talking about his journey to the UK, Youssef revealed feelings of excitement triggered by the fact that he was not caught:

It's definitely the biggest adventure [1 second pause] we had. Like it was all illegally, messing with countries. Crossing borders without passport. The stress you get before getting to the boarding, to the airplane, when the police comes and you have to act normal and you don't know if you are acting normal, so am 'I normal yet?' [Laughing] Yes. I was acting really cool. I was completely...I think people believed me. The thing is I shaved my beard and I was wearing pink. I was wearing some shirt, I was like...I was shouting at people for letting me late, I don't know I was like: 'come on I have an airplane to catch'. I can't pronounce 'r' so maybe they thought I was French, that was my ID, my false one. [Laughing]. **(Interview response)**

Youssef's use of the word 'adventure' offers an alternative insight into how individuals might experience the risks and thrills of crossing borders. Moreover, it draws attention to how such life-changing experiences may result in acts of solidarity and coming together. Youssef's story also reveals the process of having to mask one's identity as a refugee in order not to be caught, introducing the idea of performativity and 'refugeeness' as an identity indicator that automatically places one in a precarious legal position.

Through wearing a pink shirt and employing particular body language, Youssef embodied a particular identity (that of a tourist) and in extension engaged in a process of storytelling towards his surrounding audiences: 'Even my clothes, I was careful to wear nice stuff so I will not stand out.' His choice of colour (pink) was also part of presenting a safer, and in extension more 'feminine' image instead of that of the 'dangerous' young male migrant as constructed through media discourses. Interestingly, although Youssef does not directly mention the word 'passport' when he talks about his false ID, this is communicated through his narrative, which underlines the inherent connection between borders and mobility in terms of access and the right to move.

Khaled also described the way in which he had to hide his identity as an asylum seeker in order not to attract any negative attention or get caught. For Caleb, originally from Nigeria, this was more complicated due to his colour of the skin which he felt immediately identified him as a 'foreigner'. A similar experience was shared by Ibrahim who was also aware that through his physical appearance people would automatically assume his 'migrant' status. As he explained: 'I know that the moment people see me they can understand I am not from here and that changes how they behave.' Participants' identity markers can therefore impact experiences of forced displacement through either supporting or complicating one's journey.

#### 4.4.1 'Choosing' The UK As A 'Destination' Country

In their article on destination preferences of forcibly displaced individuals during 2015, Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2018) reflect on the complexities of the word 'choice' within the context of migration. As outlined, they actively avoided the use of the phrase 'choice' particularly when describing the countries to which people decided to go. The term 'choice' carries its own 'baggage' as it challenges the notion of the helpless refugee and introduces that

of the benefit-driven migrant who abuses the legal system for his or her own gain as supported by dominant media narrative tropes. Equally, as Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2018: 24) observe,

The absence of choice in the decision to leave should not, however be assumed to mean that refugees and other migrants are passive victims propelled around the world by external forces. Like all migrants, forced migrants make choices, albeit within a narrower range of possibilities.

Such choices occur within a particular field of possibilities such as individuals' country of origin, their age, gender as well as their socioeconomic status and financial and social capital. For example, Khaled's ability to be in control of the decision-making process of selecting his final destination country was dependent on his social network and in particular, on his family's financial ability to finance his fake passport and pay for his plane ticket. This was not the case for all participants: for some, who did not have enough funds to purchase travel documents, alternative routes had to be explored. For example, Caleb had to rely on travel agents who introduced him to smugglers who facilitated this journey to the UK. Ibrahim, explained he was not aware of the destination until the moment he met with the smuggler:

I did not know where I was going. We were all waiting for the van to stop so they would tell us where we are. I just waited for the van to stop, I was so thirsty and it was thirty of us locked up. **(Interview response)**

In certain cases, individual choice may become constrained by insufficient funds (Robinson and Segrott 2002), whereas others might rely solely on smugglers who will determine the destination country and available travel route (Crawley 2010). A small percentage of participants were not aware of their final destination. For example, Rima explained how her brother arranged her journey without her knowing any details:

I am a woman and cannot travel alone at my age, I cannot run fast or hide. I know some people traveled by foot and went to different countries. My brother told me this would be the safest way. He knew someone who could help. **(Interview response)**

More than half of the research participants made a conscious decision to come to the UK. In some cases this decision had been made on their behalf as they had to rely on agents who were in charge of issuing travel documents and planning their journey. For example, Lucas relied on his uncle's connection who had contacts in the UK. The majority of this study's participants had no family members in the UK but instead had access to wider social and digital networks comprising extended social relations and travel mediators. Various studies report that social networks impact upon migration as they serve as sources of information, practical help and emotional support (Neumayer 2004; Papadopoulou 2004). A small number of participants explained that they came to the UK because they had distant family members (cousins) or close friends. For others, the decision rested on existing English language skills while others described how they believe they would be treated with respect and offered humanitarian protection. Amongst the participants who were aware of their destination country, English language was an equally important factor as they believed it would offer them better possibilities for integration.

Youssef described during his interview that he decided to come to the UK because of his existing English language skills:

I speak English. I did not want to waste two more years learning another language. I can't learn any other language, I'm literally done. So, I decided to come to the UK. But for people who can't speak English and still come to the UK, I think they are doing big mistake, real big mistake. Because it's the same, to be honest. In Sweden, Germany, you can talk with your case worker- I know it's a year, you wait for a year, but he is talking with you, you can ring him every day (...) So I don't think they need to come to the UK. **(Interview response)**

Such an understanding on the vital role of English for integration is reflected in the Home Office's decision to invest a total of ten million pounds towards English language classes for Syrian refugees arriving under the Government's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (Home Office 2017). It must be noted that such initiatives focus particularly on Syrian refugees that are offered asylum through a specific bureaucratic and legal pathway, and therefore does not apply to all individuals seeking asylum in the UK. In fact, asylum seekers can only apply for

state-funded lessons 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) after they have been living in the UK for a minimum of six months (Refugee Action 2018).

For some participants, including Kamara, a young Syrian man in his late twenties, coming to the UK became a priority due to their positioning in Calais and its close geographical proximity to the UK. Kamara explained that 'You would hear a lot about the UK, each week more people managed to go. It became a dream place, to go to London and live your life.' As Khaled explained there are many Facebook pages that provide support to individuals who are planning on travelling to the UK: 'you can find information about services as well as connect with people and ask for help.' Smartphone messaging technologies such as WhatsApp and Viber also served as useful technologies through which individuals sent updates on their journey's status, provided warning of border control and offered advice.

A growing body of literature highlights the relevance of colonial relationships (Jackson et al 2013; Wilkulnd 2012) which are also associated with familiarity with the language as well as more favourable visa requirements (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2018: 21). For Caleb, his decision to come to the UK was influenced by his country's colonial connection with the UK, as well as his English language skills:

Yeah, that is a question that people always ask: 'Why did you come to England.' There are so many white people who ask you. One, Britain colonised us, a big part of the world, especially my country so most of the things we do in Nigeria are after the British system. English is our official language. So, it is a bit difficult for me to go to Germany, we don't speak German- or go to France, we don't speak French, or go to Belgium, or somewhere else in Europe. (...) Under my consideration, you might be looking at white people coming to the UK that might have some ties here, family ties, friends because after the trauma, after the stress of running away from persecution you don't want to have another problem to speak in a different language. So, it is important for you to come to England where you think you will be a bit more comfortable than going to another place. **(Interview response)**

In comparison to Caleb's recognition of the colonial ties between his country and the UK, such an interrelationship was absent from political statements responding to the rising numbers of

individuals fleeing African countries and travelling towards Europe and the UK. Such an absence was also evident in mainstream media and political narratives, which label displaced individuals as ‘migrants’ who, unlike ‘refugees’, are not protected by the UNHCR Convention and who are deemed not to have any claims or connections with the states to which they travel to in search of asylum.



Figure 29: Image of individuals aboard an inflatable vessel rescued by SEA-Watch 3 rescue ship on January 2019.

Figure 29 serves as an example of an NBC News article commenting on Europe’s challenge to *distinguish* between genuine refugees and economic migrants. The image was taken by photojournalist Federico Scoppa corresponding for global news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP). The choice of the word ‘grapple’ in the article’s title, emphasizes Europe’s putative inability to defend itself as well as communicates a sense of struggle. On closer analysis, the individuals’ dark skin invites potential spectators to speculate on their country of origin, while their characterization as ‘migrants’ per image’s caption indirectly refuses their naming as refugees.

An example of the effects of not being able to distinguish between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ who ‘pose a threat’ to the UK economy, can be seen during a public statement by the UK’s former Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond (BBC 2015), who spoke about the large numbers of ‘desperate migrants’ entering Europe from Africa and who are argued to be threatening quality of life in the UK by depleting the welfare system:

The gap in standards of living between Europe and African means there will always be millions of Africans with the economic motivation to try to get to Europe...So long as there are large numbers of pretty desperate migrants marauding around the area, there always will be a threat to the tunnel security...Europe can’t protect itself, preserve its standard of living and social infrastructure if it has to absorb millions of migrants from Africa. (BBC 2015: np).

Absent from the above statement is any sense of responsibility in terms of the involvement of the UK and other European countries historically in terms of their colonial past. Another missing link is the relationship between the geopolitics of war and displacement and the social inequalities (e.g. living standards) between Europe and countries across Africa and the Middle East (Bhambra 2015). Such an acknowledgement of a lack of accountability is expressed by Youssef:

I am here because your countries are killing people in my country. It’s not my war, so yeah that’s why I am here. And when I say ‘you’ I don’t mean just the UK, I mean all countries. Even if you are not inside it you are still part of it because they are not doing anything. **(Interview response)**

In researching the reasons why my research participants travelled to the UK, the role of the media also emerged as a prominent response. In particular, those arriving between 2015-16, explained how media documentation contributed significantly to the way they perceived the UK as a ‘free’, ‘democratic’ country. As Riaz argues:

The media have a very important role to play in the way the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ developed. Why would people not want to migrate to a country where

freedom is 'given'? The UK was shown through the media as 'Hollywood', a fantasy land where everyone can get a better life. And of course, you hear of all these people you know or that your friends and family know that they have found a new life in the UK. Who wouldn't want that? **(Fieldnote Entry)**

Riaz arrived in the UK as a minor in 2005 and has lived in the North East of England for the past twelve years. His experience is unique amongst my dataset as he was the only person to seek asylum in the UK as a minor. As he explained during our conversation, the extensive media documentation of refugee journeys during 2015 normalised the journey to the UK and created a public understanding of the country as a safe destination. Lina also explained that 'the UK seemed like a safe country, a country which believes in Human rights and women's rights. So many people were seeking asylum already and the UK has a history of being a country with many different groups.' Lina's journey towards asylum is also unique amongst my dataset due to her legal and physical journeys. In comparison to other participants, Lina did not arrive to the UK as an asylum seeker but became one, after she realised she had been caught in a trafficking network. Similar to other participants, Lina's impression of the UK as a 'safe country' changed since her arrival and in relation to her experience of waiting for a decision regarding her claim (see *Chapter 6*). The following section will now examine the role of smartphones and social media in supporting participants' completion and documentation of their journeys to the UK.

#### 4.5 The Journey to the UK: Media Journeys

Depending on each participant's socioeconomic conditions and life situation, the journey to the UK differed significantly in terms of accessibility, physical threat, and trauma. Access to economic power proved to be a significant factor in impacting journey routes. McLaughlin (2015) noted how different socioeconomic circumstances impacted migrant journeys on the Balkan route:

Not all migrants have smartphones and virtual, online lives, however: Syrians tend to have the most money and best kit on the Balkan route, while Afghans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Eritreans and Somalis are amongst the poorest, and their journeys are usually the slowest and toughest, with little help from internet resources (2015: 9).

Not all participants had the same levels of access to digital/media infrastructure but all of them described their reliance on their phones as their primary 'survival kit' (Gillespie et al 2018). According to Khaled, he could not have survived the journey without his smartphone, as he relied on it to navigate his way across different countries using Google maps and carried three batteries with him, a charger and a charge-bank, and would charge his phone at every opportunity he had.

K: Without my phone, I couldn't have done it.

NS: Where did you charge it?

K: In Lebanon, I charged it at home before I left because I knew I would need it of course. I bought a portable battery, it was very good- it could charge the phone for three times and a spare battery for the phone, so I changed the battery. So, I had the phone and its battery, the spare battery and the portable charger [power-bank]. I had it offline all the time without any internet and even the brightness I put it very low and always it was offline- I used it only when I really needed it. And in camps in Mytilene and Thessaloniki we slept one night in a hotel so I charged all the batteries there. **(Interview transcript)**

Gillespie et al. (2016) argue that digital infrastructure is equally as important as the physical infrastructures of roads, railways, seas and borders controlling the movement of people, including applications, websites, message and phone calling platforms, social media networks and translation services (Gillespie et al. 2016: 2). Smartphones have myriad uses, as people can also access learning resources and continue their education while in transit. In particular, Slater (2015) mentions one young Syrian man's efforts to continue his education through reading engineering manuals on his phone and learning German via YouTube videos (Slater 2015: A1). In their research with unaccompanied minor refugees in Germany, Kutscher and Krebs (2016: np) also noted that the use of digital media and particularly social media was identified as a primary requirement, similar to food.

Most research participants, especially those who were in their mid-twenties/early thirties, remained connected with different online audiences as well as documenting their journeys through taking photographs from different locations. Lina described how she saved favourite photos and inspiration images with important messages: 'I've kept all my favourite photos and some images with inspirational photographs [popular memes] on my phone close to me all the time. When I feel down I look at them and know I need to keep going.' Khaled explained how taking images with his smartphone became a continuous practice:

I sent to my families. For example, the first one I sent was on the airplane because I told you I was worried about the passport- I thought it would not be, it would be fake. It was not fake but I thought they might think I'm here illegally. So, the first photo I took and sent straight to my family was on the airplane. I took some photos but did not send the rest, I just sent one. When I arrived to Ismir in Turkey I phone my mum and said - when I knew I would leave: 'Yes mum, we are at the hotel now'. We were not at the hotel now, we were planning on going to Greece but I did not want her to worry. So, I said 'We are at the hotel now and are going to sleep now, good night' after two hours when I arrived I just sent photo I said: 'I'm here now' because I know that she would be very worried. I took selfie photos everywhere, especially in Turkey, Greece, Serbia and in France- because I love taking selfies. **(Interview response)**

Throughout their journeys, participants shared their experiences with family members through text updates and photographs. The primary audience of these visual stories of transition was the family members and close friends that were left behind, or in some cases, seeking asylum in a different European country. Ibrahim explained how he would regularly update his mother and send photographs of himself to confirm his location and well-being. Participants' visual stories served as evidence of safety and well-being, as well as visual testimonials of personal success as participants recognised the precarious nature of their journeys and communicate these journeys with a sense of pride in 'having made it.' Such digitalized transnational communication practices supported long-distance emotional ties as participants described how they stayed in touch with their families. As Youssef explained 'Yes, it was the views - I've been here. And I used to send a few videos to my family, to my friends and other people.' Similarly, Caleb explained how he relied on Skype to contact his family.

These findings support Chouliaraki's (2016) observation on the frequency of taking photos and in particular selfies being a common practice amongst displaced individuals who tend to document their journeys with their smartphones and share images with their families and friends. The mediated nature of the 'refugee crisis' was also addressed by Riaz, according to which media contribute towards a particular image of refugees and that any departure from the norm challenges the way people see UK and affects the way they respond toward. As he explained: 'people rely on the media and the media have the power to show what a refugee should look like.'

For Lina, taking selfies and texting with friends on WhatsApp is part of her everyday practice and her main avenue for communication. Smartphones not only enable social ties and communication, but they also serve as information sources as well as portable memory galleries of both past and present lives. Use of smartphones and social media platforms differed between female and male participants as female participants would avoid publicly disseminating images of themselves and would only share privately with trusted contacts. This served as another safety mechanism to protect their anonymity and to remain hidden from family members who had physically, sexually or mentally abused them. In comparison, the majority of male participants - especially those in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties would often online images of themselves alone or with friends online.

In thinking about smartphones and communication it is also important to note that the kind of 'perpetual connectivity' and the intrinsic integration of social media practices in our lives compels us to speak of a new state of the self, (...) tethered to our 'always on/always-on-you-communications devices and the people and things we reach through them' (Turkle 2008: 121). Such instances of self-representation were observed amongst some of the participants, especially the ones aged 25-30 years-old, who marked their arrival with a Facebook update, either by posting a selfie of themselves or by posting a few words and 'checking in'- thus positioning themselves physically and symbolically within the UK borders. Their '*I am here*' posts not only functioned as locative signifiers, but also functioned as instances of memory-making as they became personal tales of achievement indicating the end of their difficult journeys. Such a process of commemorating one's successful arrival was explored in my conversation with Khaled talking about his decision to share his news of arriving to the UK on Facebook with an image of the Union Jack Flag and the following text (see Figure 30):

Thanks to the almighty God. Thanks to the Almighty God, his reconciliation, family contentment, family continued prayers, and after thirty-seven tiring days of hard work and travelling between ten countries Lebanon – Turkey- Greece – Serbia- Hungary - Austria – Germany – France, and finally thanks to God, I made it to the United Kingdom.



Figure 30: Participant-produced Facebook post announcing his safe arrival to the UK.

الحمد لله رب العالمين..  
بفضل الله عز وجل وتوفيقه ورضاه ورضا الوالدين ودعائهم المتواصل وبعد تعب 37 يوم وسفر بين عشر دول  
(لبنان-تركيا-اليونان-مقدونيا-صربيا-هنغاريا-النمسا-ألمانيا-فرنسا وأخيراً الحمد لله وصلت بريطانيا

Although throughout his journey he had been posting images of himself, on this occasion he chose to use the flag as his main image- a symbol of sovereignty and national belonging. The image emphasized his safe arrival and the culmination of his journey as he reached his ‘target’:

I did not spend any time waiting around, I was always moving. In Calais, I slept at the port not the camp as I did not want to get comfortable. I had to move on. I tried many times to cross and each time the police would catch me and take

me back to the camp. And then I would go back, walk for an hour and start again (...) It was the best thing. I've never felt like that before, really. It's because in those nine days in France they were very tiring. I don't know I just wanted to arrive. That was my target so I couldn't stop, I just wanted to arrive and would keep trying every day. I passed all the barriers before, I wanted to arrive now. The last one it was the most difficult yes, but I won't allow it to stop me. **(Interview response)**

During our interview, I invited Khaled to join me in a process of co-analysis and asked him to explain why he chose this particular image. He explained that it was important for him to post an image of the flag as it served as a symbolic salute and communicated his feelings of gratefulness for having managed to reach his destination. Khaled's insight into his choice of the flag should be understood as an element in his active and ongoing process of constructing his reality as well as an important audience to which he presents himself. In describing the last part of his journey from France to England, Khaled used the word 'target', a word that carries military language connotations as well as acquires a more aggressive tone: 'It was the most difficult part, I was almost there but still far away from safety. I had to stay focused on my target and keep trying.' As Khaled explained, the flag signified the end of the first phase of his journey (arriving to the UK) and signaled the start of the second phase of him building his life in a new country. When asked about his choice of the word 'target' in relation to its military connotation, Khaled explained that it was accidental but instead he employed it in order to communicate the urgency and absolute necessity of arriving, as in contrast to some of his friends he tried to continuously move and not 'to become comfortable.' As he explained, he avoided staying at Calais camp as he did not want to become absorbed by a temporary community and a life-style of waiting, instead he remained in the periphery of the camp.

Similarly, following his safe arrival to the UK, Youssef checked in 'safely' in London feeling 'peaceful' while posting 'end of my trip.' As he explained during our conversations, the post signified the end of his journey; it was a public acknowledgement and a celebration of his successful journey, but it was also another social space to share such an experience as Facebook plays an important role in his life both in terms of socialising as well as accessing information and producing/sharing content. He explained that his post was underpinned by his desire to share this experience with his family and his friends who he left behind but also to connect with existing Syrian nationals in the UK. Throughout his journey he had been a member of different

closed Facebook groups that offered information, useful links and update on transition routes as well as emotional and moral support. Equally, it was an opportunity to mark an important moment his life, successfully arriving to the UK and starting a new chapter in his life.

Although Youssef had been documenting his journey on his phone- taking short video clips of each stop, he did not post anything until after he'd reached the UK. He informed me that all of his friends had done the same: posting on Facebook, informing their loved ones while also sharing their stories of safe arrival. Interestingly, his actual lived experience of arrival to the UK was quite different – described as 'one of the most humiliating moments' of his life. As he explained, he did not know where to go, how to seek asylum and did not understand the process as he was detained in a waiting room at the airport before being transported to a detention centre. In his own words:

I was confused. It was the biggest humiliation of my life to be honest. Because you are going somewhere asking for help, you know what I mean? You don't need help physically, but you need his help. So, it was one of the worse moments in my life. I gave her my Syrian passport and said 'I am here to claim asylum.' She said: 'Where is your visa?' I said 'I don't have one, I am here to claim asylum.' She said: 'What about another passport, do you have visa on another passport?' I said: 'No, I came here illegally.' So yeah, I had to wait for about an hour and then the police officer came and took me to detention and stayed there for one day and then they came for the interview. **(Interview response)**

I was interested in finding out more about how Youssef used Facebook as a platform for self-representation and how he documented particular moments of his experience of forced displacement while in transit as well as post-arrival in the UK. In particular, I was interested in addressing the similarities and differences between his lived experiences and they ways in which he represented his life via Facebook. Youssef explained how he was very selective of what he posted both in terms of his personal safety (for identification purposes) but also in terms of 'protecting' his family and not sharing the full extent of his difficulties. The notion of 'keeping up appearances' is not unique to the sphere of social media, and in many social situations, individuals may decide to present an 'edited' version of one's reality.

In analysing participants' stories, it is important to remain conscious of the curatorial dimension of self-representation through Facebook profile pages, in terms of assembling particular constellations of self-representation. Through their use of social media some participants appeared to be engaging in an activity of online 'branding' in the sense of creating particular subjectivities through assembling traces of visual and textual representations that responded to particular expectations, norms and public understandings. My personal interest in understanding and employing narrative as a methodology as well as an analytical framework, focuses on the kind of stories that individuals seeking asylum are *able* to tell, the conditions in which these narrative expressions emerge and finally the kind of stories that participants share about their themselves, and in doing so engage in processes of production of the self (Usher 1997).

There is therefore a dialectic relationship between society and the individual, a relationship which is enacted within the polarity of the 'me' and the 'I' (Mead 1934). When engaging in storytelling acts, individuals respond to their understanding and assumptions of meaning - any kind of storytelling interaction arises in response to other individuals within a social-symbolic world of internal and inter-subjective relations (Blumer 1969). Mead's theory is a useful analytic tool in understanding processes of production of the self and different representation of selfhood as participant stories change both online and offline, depending on which kind of self they are identifying with as well as which audience they address. As several scholars have noted (See Donath and boyd 2004; Papacharissi 2002), 'information communication technologies provide individuals with additional tools for the production of more detailed and controlled performance of the self' (Papacharissi 2010: 69). Ultimately, the stories that people tell can therefore only be partial and need to be understood as products of other factors such as real and imagined audiences, social and cultural contexts, power hierarchies and social locations, impacting their production. There is a process of curation in choosing which self-representations are appropriate, for whom and what is acceptable- as the social contract for what is representable is constantly changing.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the concept of journey as a narrative theme as well as a structuring device supporting this investigation's analytical journey throughout the different sections that correspond to different stages of participants' experiences of arriving to the UK. This chapter has demonstrated how the 'forced choices' that individuals are able to make were determined

by their home country, age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, language skills and connections. By adopting an intersectional approach, this analysis sought to challenge assumptions that there is a universal experience of forced displacement and instead recognised the co-existence of 'different axes of oppression' weaved together to 'create a compound effect' on the lives of asylum seekers (Lenette and Boddy 2013: 4).

Such a compound effect was experienced by all individuals in different ways and varying degrees as their experience of seeking asylum was also impacted by different circumstances and identity markers. For example, gender clearly defined experiences of seeking asylum as the majority of female participants escape gender-based violence, whereas most of the male participants fled persecution and military enforcement. Additionally, race and ethnicity served as important factors impacting certain participants' journeys – in some cases, serving as an obstacle to safety through highlighting their 'otherness' and amplifying their identification as asylum seekers. Moreover, this chapter reflected on the mediated nature of the 'refugee crisis' and established how participants are active agents involved in documenting and producing visual material about their lives. The role of social media and digital technologies is important in supporting self-representation as well as serving as additional platforms for witnessing set against a dominant visual culture that operates in accordance with dominant narratives and visual representations. More importantly, this chapter has offered an introduction to the kind of stories that individuals seeking asylum share, while outlining how such stories become structured around and in response to dominant narrative expectations around the 'reasons' for which individuals seek asylum. Through juxtaposing the reason(s) and lived experiences of travelling to the UK with the storied accounts shared via social media, this chapter also outlines how individuals may choose to storify lived experiences in a particular way that responds to anticipated audiences and constructs particular images of themselves. Stories may therefore acquire both symbolic and narrative 'currency' and support individuals' self-representation practices.

Extending the metaphor of journey, the following chapter will now examine individual experiences of seeking asylum in the UK as the second phase of one's asylum-seeking journey. In particular, this next chapter will present individual experiences of going through the legal process of seeking asylum with a focus on legal requirements of producing a 'credible' story that meets legal and sociopolitical demands.

## Chapter Five: Legal Journeys

### 5.1 Youssef's Story

I met Youssef during the early stages of my ethnographic journey in mid-March 2016, while I was still developing my methodological toolkit and reaching out to different charitable organisations and potential community gatekeepers. Through a series of interviews, WhatsApp conversations and impromptu walking interviews across Stockton's city, Youssef invited me in his everyday life in order to document and explore his personal experience of seeking asylum in the UK, with a particular focus on how such an experience of 'waiting' impacted his everyday life and sense of purpose. Youssef was in his late twenties when he left his hometown, Aleppo, in Syria, with his sister and parents. Although his family was reluctant to leave at first, as the situation in Syria escalated, they started planning their escape:

We couldn't go out anymore because there was, like fire guns, everything in the streets and there was no electricity, no water, no gas. You know it wasn't 'normal' life. It wasn't life anymore. No connections, nothing to eat, nothing to drink. And we had some money, like we were able to leave, so we decided to go, and it wasn't our war. It started to be a big crazy war, you know like other countries coming in, so we left. **(Interview response)**

In contrast to some of his friends, Youssef's family had some savings which allowed them to leave Aleppo in 2013. Before travelling to the UK, Youssef lived in Istanbul, Turkey, for seven months together with his younger sister while their parents travelled to Sweden. Due to some personal circumstances, he was forced to leave Turkey by boat and travel to Greece where he stayed in a camp on Lesbos Island for two weeks before travelling to Piraeus port in Athens by ferry and then flying from Athens to London after three weeks, where he hoped he would be able to continue his studies while waiting for the situation in Syria to improve.

Youssef has been waiting for a decision regarding his asylum claim for more than two years. In contrast to other Syrian nationals, Youssef has been waiting for a long time and has not been given any explanation regarding such a claim. When asked about his asylum interview, he recounted feeling 'tested' at the time and wondered whether his decision to complete his interview in English impacted negatively his claim:

OK, all the questions were to test that I am really from Syria. I mean anybody can answer them, if you ask a few friends (...) I asked people and they said 'you just have to answer, like short answers, don't say anymore words than the question – just answer it'. I didn't do that [he laughs], no I was explaining and I did the interview in English. There was an Arab speaker, he was chilling I was talking in English. But, this might be also another reason. **(Interview response)**

Since he arrived in Stockton-on-Tees, Youssef he has been engaged in three different research projects as he is interested in sharing his experiences in order to inform people of the experience of seeking asylum. As he explains, he tries to fill his weekly schedule with activities so for the last two years, he has been attending English language classes at a local College, as well as volunteering at three different refugee and asylum seeker support organisations as a translator:

Basically, I just try to translate. I can speak a few languages, so whenever someone ask for help I try to be there. Or physically of course, if someone needs moving to a new house or out of an old house. And you know about the events, one event actually, the first one. I want to help others, the same way people helped me when I first arrive. Some people don't even speak English so for them it is more difficult. I like helping others and it also helps me forget that my life is on hold. **(Interview response)**

Youssef explains that waiting can be difficult, especially on an everyday level as it disrupts his ability to make plans and be pro-active in terms of 'fixing his life' as he describes. Furthermore, he explains how he feels that he is 'wasting time' due to his inability to plan ahead, so instead he focuses on 'spending his time somehow':

Daily routine...well I would usually wake up whenever, just like I have nothing to do, unless if I'm meeting you. I might just stay in the house for an hour, two hours and then go to the drop in, in one of the churches. I go there, I help my friends if they need any translating. If I have college, I will go to college. So yes,

I don't do like anything. Helping if somebody needs. Chilling, if there is a party, spending my time somehow. You can't have a daily life without (1 second pause) knowing...you know like. So yeah, I'm just waiting. **(Interview response)**

Youssef explained how he's tried to have a good relationship with his case-worker, whom he regularly contacts for updates as well as advice. Like many participants in this study, Youssef expressed his expectation that the decision-making process would be a straight-forward one and that he would receive an answer quickly (within 3-6 months). However, the reality has been different as he has been waiting for more than 2 years. When talking about his experience of seeking asylum, Youssef describes the process of waiting for an answer as the most unsettling stage - in particular the emotional state of waiting without any point of reference and without any reassurance about what the decision will be. Like other participants, Youssef described how he was advised by his case worker not to 'stir things up' as any direct communication could impact his case negatively by drawing 'unnecessary' attention. Youssef's story is representative of this study's findings in relation to how the asylum seeking procedure structurally and symbolically shape individual refugee lives. Equally, it draws our attention to the current socio-political-cultural-legal and media context in which these stories emerge.

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Youssef's story foregrounds this chapter's focus on narrated experiences of seeking asylum in the UK by first introducing the asylum determination process in the UK. In doing so, it seeks to present participants' retrospective acknowledgements of the need to prove their genuine need to claim asylum against an increasingly 'suspicious' and 'hostile' legal environment that differentiates between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' asylum seekers. Through their interview responses, participants commented on personal and collective experiences of feeling 'tested' as well as the need to present their experiences in particular ways (i.e. straightforward and short answers, provide evidence, speak in your native language, etc.) that would increase their possibilities of securing humanitarian assistance.

In order to respond to the legal and narrative constraints of asylum determination process, participants devised new strategies and coping mechanisms such as accessing and support from others in preparation for their asylum interviews and meeting with immigration officers. Ultimately, this chapter analyses participants' storytelling practices within a legal context and

focuses on what kind of stories become shared and how their understanding of the asylum determination process becomes shaped by narrative and legal expectations of the 'credible refugee'.

## **5.2 Understanding the Asylum Determination Process in the UK**

This chapter introduces the legal process as a second-phase of the exilic journey. In entering a host country, asylum seekers are therefore engaged in a process of rebuilding their lives, which involves refugee status acquisition, socialization, securing local education and/or employment, and participation in the social, cultural, and political life of their host country. Such a process can be time-consuming and heavily bureaucratic, and as a result many individuals may become stranded in a state of 'limbo' until the moment of acquiring their refugee status.

An individual seeking international protection in the UK, must apply for asylum to the Home Office, the ministerial department responsible for immigration and asylum (Home Office 2018; Stavropoulou 2019: 96). After their application for asylum, individuals undergo a screening interview followed by a security check (e.g. checking previous asylum claims in the UK or Europe), during which they are photographed and fingerprinted before being issued an Asylum Registration Card. During their screening interview, applicants are asked to provide personal details and describe their journey to the UK. Their formal asylum application is then authorized by the UK Border Agency (BA) while each case is assigned to a specific staff member of the UK Border Agency, known as a case owner, who will support the claimant throughout the process from the time of application being made until its final decision (e.g. permission to stay or being removed from the UK).

Claimants are then asked to attend a first reporting event where they meet their case worker and discuss their case. The 'substantive interview' or 'asylum interview' takes place within the next couple of weeks, during which applicants can describe in more detail their individual experience including their reasons for leaving and seeking asylum (Home Office 2018). After their screening interview, asylum seekers are transported to accommodation centres across the UK, while others might be sent to Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre or Yarl's Wood Immigration Centre, in order to be detained while their application is being fast-tracked and a decision may be made within seven to nine days. Following a successful application,

claimants are given 'Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK' or are granted different forms of temporary, humanitarian status (Home Office 2018).

Individuals whose applications are rejected have the right to lodge an appeal. If an appeal is accepted, the case is then re-submitted to the Home Office and will either result in Refugee Status or another form of humanitarian status, or if dismissed, the individual might be able to present his or her case to higher courts or be rejected altogether (Rotter 2016). According to official guidelines, the decision-making process should last approximately six months - although in certain cases some claims may be fast-tracked. The length of an asylum application rests on different factors including: the complexity of the case; the time when the application was made; supporting evidence; their country of origin; and finally, access to legal representation (Rotter 2016; Stavropoulou 2019: 96).

Whilst waiting for a decision regarding their asylum claim, individual seeking asylum can apply for financial support and free accommodation which is provided on a no-choice basis in several locations across the UK. Dispersal became official policy in 1999 following the establishment of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) which served as a central authority for managing housing and welfare support for all individuals seeking asylum. As Zetter and Pearl (2000) note, dispersal would occur predominantly in areas with low council housing and in areas which were usually defined by housing deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion (Darling 2011).

According to asylum policies, individuals seeking asylum in the UK are not permitted to undertake paid employment and can be penalised if caught doing so (Smyth and Kum 2010). As a result, they rely on a weekly income support of £37.75 per week, which according to the Refugee Council is 30 percent lower than the usual rate of financial support a British citizen would receive (Refugee Council 2018: 5). Such policies focused on restricting the social, civic and geographical mobility of asylum seekers, further amplify individuals' experiences of exclusion, marginalization and inequality in relation to accessing services (Hynes and Sales 2009). Research has also found that the inability to work directly impacts individuals' mental well-being as well as serves as barriers to integration and socialisation (Fozdar 2009).

For the majority of this study's participants, the process of submitting a claim for asylum was straightforward in so far as they presented themselves upon arrival, submitted their claim, and were then transferred to temporary accommodation before being relocated to the North East

of England on a no-choice dispersal. In comparison, Lucas had a different experience when he arrived in the UK as he was detained following his asylum claim:

They asked me one of the reasons for my claim, so I explained because I was suffering from depression I wouldn't be able to cope in detention. I was just coming from a traumatic experience, but they didn't listen to what I had to say. In detention, luckily the doctors examined me and said I shouldn't be detained so they mentioned in their report that I was not fit to be detained. So, I had my lawyer that they allocated for my asylum claim, so the lawyer told me that with the medical evidence saying that I am not fit to be detained that she would get me out. So, she sent a request to the Home Office, but it wasn't accepted. So, what she did, she had to do injunction protocol to the judge that went through and was successful. I meant to be having my asylum interview in detention, but I wasn't fit to even do that, I was completely...I couldn't even speak. So, she asked not to go ahead, I think they wanted to force me but realised there was nothing I could do. So, I didn't do the interview and finally, next week I got released with the injunction protocol. **(Interview response)**

Lucas's interview response has been selected as it highlights an important contradiction inherent within the asylum process: the need to produce an intelligible account of persecution despite potentially experiencing high levels of distress and trauma (Paskey 2016). In line with the findings of existing ethnographic research on asylum seekers' experiences of asylum interview, many participants in my study commented on how difficult it was for them emotionally and mentally to have to revisit traumatic memories in front of 'complete strangers' especially as they were experiencing high levels of distress (Rotter 2016; Paskey 2016). According to Burki (2013: 287), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can impact their ability to file timely claims as well as their emotional ability to recount such traumatic experiences within the context of an interview. Furthermore, as Baillot, Cowan and Munro (2012) note, the heavily politicised context of asylum decision-making can also impact and silence sexual assault narratives. This was particularly challenging for female participants who had experienced sexual and physical abuse, as they had to narrate such experiences as part of their asylum claim. As Lina explains:

I said to them I lost my memory and many things I can't remember I said to them. But they just asked me how that happened, and they did not push me too much. Because when I gave my interview I was under drug effect, medication for depression. (...) It was really hard to have to tell them what happened to me. It was too soon. **(Interview response)**

As established in Chapter 2, despite an increasing body of gender-sensitive guidance on displacement and asylum across the European Union and international levels, gender remains a key issue as women are not guaranteed consistent gender-sensitive treatment across Europe. For example, although the UK courts have recognised that the trauma of rape can prohibit reporting due to feelings of shame, guilt or fear, female asylum seekers who have experienced sexual violence are still obliged to report such incidents as soon as they occur as that forms the basis of their asylum claim (Home Office 2012).

Lina's reference of being 'too soon' to narrate traumatic experiences reveals two problematic areas of asylum seeking: the re-living of trauma while making a claim and secondly, the legal requirement of having to submit an asylum claim following entry in the host-country. In particular, time is of particular essence in terms of 'credibility', as individuals are encouraged to apply for asylum as soon as they enter the country and any delay in doing so might result in complications regarding their claim.

According to an interviewee who is a former asylum case officer and solicitor specializing in immigration law, asylum seekers in the UK should:

Claim asylum at the earliest opportunity otherwise it might negatively affect their application if they don't. It depends on the circumstances, but for example if fear of harm existed when they arrived in the UK and applicants were an adult without a disability then yes, not coming forward immediately and claiming asylum on the first instance would mean that the Home Office would most likely treat that person's credibility as negatively affected. It doesn't mean that they would immediately reject the case, because they might be able to corroborate what that person said and cross-check additional evidence and information they have about the country, but if there were inconsistencies within the person's account or inconsistencies in the objective

information, that's when negative credibility becomes more important.

**(Interview response)**

According to the Home Office's official guidance documents *Asylum Policy Instruction: Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status Version 9.0* (2015): 'asylum claims are correctly decided, in accordance with our international obligations under the Refugee Convention and the ECHR, in a timely and sensitive way and on an individual, objective and impartial basis' (Home Office 2015: 5). The notion of credibility is important in understanding the current socio-political and legal framework within which such narrative acts occur. As this chapter demonstrates, in the UK, such stories occur within a matrix of expectations and constructions of 'refugees' supported by the government, the state, the media and the public, which, as Kushner (2003) observes, 'have intertwined in a mutually reinforcing and reassuring process to problematize and often stigmatize asylum seekers.' (2003: 261).

As Blommaert (2001) concluded in his research with African asylum seekers in Belgium, the asylum procedure 'involves a complex set of discursive practices and language ideologies that are, in practice, being used as criteria for 'truth', 'trustworthiness', 'coherence' and 'consistency' (2001: 414). Similarly, some participants described how they felt their stories were dissected, cross-referenced and in some cases questioned by officials conducting the interviews. The majority expressed how their interview resembled an interrogation during which they were called to prove their right to be in the UK. The following section will present participants' narrated accounts of their interview experiences.

### **5.3 Telling Stories for Legal Audiences: Credibility, Plausibility and Ticking Boxes**

As established in the previous section, to be recognised as a refugee, individuals seeking asylum need to communicate that they have a well-founded fear of persecution under one of the convention categories. Asylum seekers therefore predominantly rely on their narrative capacities in order to communicate their stories in a way that 'convince increasingly skeptical host states of their authenticity' (Eastmond 2007: 259). In doing so their stories become governed by 'socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices' (Anthias 2002: 511). As Kohli (2009) states:

Asylum seekers tell stories of their persecution and flight, which they hope will get them through whatever border stands between them and an ordinary life outside their homeland. Sometimes, when they have to, they embellish their experiences, rewrite their scripts, polish up the presentation and talk of persecution in compelling ways. They sometimes pluck out a series of linear events even when their lives and trajectories are wayward and untidy, because the ways in which asylum receptors accept stories are often in linear form, with a sequence of suffering making the links in a chain of events (2009: 107).

Kohli also highlights the need to present asylum claims in a linear form that establishes one's cause of suffering and creates a coherent and easy-to-access story. Within the asylum process, the production of stories becomes imperative as telling stories in a sequential, diachronic order is particularly useful in establishing causality and 'proving' how a chain of events has caused individuals' forced displacement. Such forms also highlight the prevalence of testimony as a central, recognisable and acceptable narrative mode for revealing the refugee experience (Wooley 2016: np). Jeffers (2011) argues that during the asylum determination process asylum seekers must construct a particular refugee identity which 'conform[s] to cultural expectations of refugees, particularly in relation to suffering' (2011: 17). In cases where individuals have no access to evidentiary documentation, relying on bodily evidence serves as an alternative.

According to Hebing (2009: 123), 'It is during this process that the subjective experiences of the individual refugee are no longer individual, but come to be documented and objectified.' The context and audience of such legal stories is therefore central in determining the kind of stories that participants shared. Lina explained how during her substantive interview, she felt like she was being 'tested' whether she was telling the truth. As she explained,

They were taking notes of every word, seeing if I am telling the truth. I know from others that you need to be careful as they will ask questions, try to see if you are really in danger. (...) They asked which language I speak and I said Albanian and Russian. The interpreter they had there had a different dialect, because in Albania we have different. In the end of interview, because I could speak English, I saw the interview and there were a lot of mistakes because I

said different things and she wrote different things. But thanks God, the solicitor he corrected. He found an interpreter who had same dialect and asked me. **(Interview response)**

The impact of the ‘deserving refugee’ who is genuinely ‘in danger’ can also be experienced and reproduced by asylum seekers on a micro-level, functioning as a burden of the refugee identity and determining what one has the right to own. During another conversation with Lina, she described how she felt the need to hide her iPhone 6 during her meetings with her case worker as she was afraid that it could impact her case:

Every time we meet and if I am wearing nice clothes she will ask me if it is new (...) When we meet I always hide my iPhone and only use my other phone because it is not expensive or new. If she saw the iPhone she would think I have money and that I am lying about my situation. I need my phone to read the news, to know what is happening in the UK and to be in touch with people like my sister and my friends. That is where I have all my photographs, videos and memories from life before and in the UK. **(Fieldnote Entry)**

In line with previous discussions around performing refugeehood, Lina becomes engaged in a process of embodying a particular recognizable representation of the asylum seeker identity as a person who can only afford second-hand clothes and cannot own an expensive mobile phone. It also highlights the performative nature of stories, in particular stories we tell others in response to an audience and in order to achieve a particular kind of recognition. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the personal story needs to adapt in order to respond to the ‘criteria that are already in place, since the procedure for asylum claims has developed within the contours of a rigid policy framework’ (Hebing 2009: 123).

### 5.3.1 Credibility As A Legal And Narrative Requirement

According to the UNHCR *Handbook* (1999), credible asylum claims should be ‘coherent and plausible’ and ‘not run counter to generally known facts’ (1999: 204). Official Home Office documentation guidance on ‘Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status’ (2012), informs that there are two types of credibility to be met: internal and external. Internal credibility means

that claims need to be internally coherent with previous verbal and written statements, and consistent with claims by witness/dependents as well as supporting documentation (2012). External credibility refers to the need of claimants' accounts to be 'consistent with generally known facts and country of origin information' (2012: 15), therefore claimants' subjective accounts need to 'match' the information found in existing country guidance documents.

As outlined earlier, the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 enabled the government to withdraw financial support from unsuccessful family claimants with dependent children, changed the appeal system as well as introduced new electronic monitoring procedures. More importantly, it 'made the question of 'credibility' of the refugee an explicit legal issue.' (Hebing 2009: 121). According to Section 2, it would be a legal offence for individuals seeking asylum to not provide a valid identity document when making a claim, unless they could justify their lack of documents. Failure to do so could result in a prison sentence of up to two years. Decisions to prosecute rest on what individuals disclose during their initial screening interview. The following sub-sections pay close attention to the asylum determination process in relation to how individuals' intersectional identities impact their storytelling experiences and how they recognise and respond to symbolic processes of exclusion and differentiation.

#### *'Where Are You From?' Nationality Determination and Credibility*

During our conversations, Khaled made an interesting point about the different strategies employed by immigration officers to 'test' credibility, as he explained that he only had to wait seventy days from the moment of arrival until he received his refugee status, which he attributes to the fact that he answered confidently the questions he was asked and had proper documentation (e.g. passport and his Syrian identity card). As he explained, having proper documentation can support one's claim but is not always enough due to the increased number of people claiming to be Syrian:

Because we know asylum seekers and talk about what questions they ask us, people usually get between 60 to 80 questions. They asked me about 125 questions about my life, about my city, about Syria. They asked me about schools, hospitals, streets, football players, national flag, national currency. So, they ask many details and they want just to check if I'm really Syrian because they wanted to check my accent as well to see if I'm Syrian or just Arabic

speaker. And I was confident because I am Syrian and at that time I was 27 years in Syria so of course I know everything, and I know more because I travelled a lot. I know many people in other cities, so I know many things about Syria. So that helped me to be more confident to answer all those questions. He tried, yes, he tried – not to make me tell different story but to make sure I am Syrian, and I think it is fair enough because many people claim asylum as Syrians. So yes, I understood why he did that, but I just said what I knew. It is my life, my story, my town, my city, my country so I just answered what I know. So, he was pretty sure that I was Syrian and that I deserved protection.

**(Interview response)**

As Khaled explains he was in a position to confidently respond to all questions asked in order to *check* his country of origin. Khaled's concluding words 'that I deserved protection' highlight the binary approach that constructs asylum seekers as bad/good; undeserving/deserving, genuine citizen/non-citizen, as well as demonstrates how individuals seeking asylum understand and reproduce such notions as well as recognise the need to produce narratives that fit within the legal and humanitarian trope of the deserving refugee. In describing his asylum claim interview with the Home Office, Youssef also reflected on the constructed nature of his narrative account in response to the dominant legal discourse underpinning refugee status determination processes and in particular the employed cross-referencing processes in testing 'authenticity':

It was good, it was easy. There were some silly questions in my opinion. Like, 'Tell us about which radio there was in Syria' or 'Which TV shows'. Like we all have satellite, you know what I mean, nobody watches National TV anymore, or radio. No one listens to radio anymore. She asked me about football teams, I said I don't like football, I play it but I don't like it. I think this is why they are keeping me. They don't believe me. **(Interview response)**

Youssef's comment on 'nobody watches National TV anymore, or radio' draws attention to changes in media consumption attitudes impacted by pro-government media agendas as well as serves as a critique of bureaucratic procedures of 'testing' one's authentic claim (e.g. Home Office's country-specific guidance documents). Such guidelines are accessed by a wide range of individuals including asylum seekers, representatives, Home Office staff members and

Immigration judges. The information is drawn by a variety of sources including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), human rights reports, newspapers, media reports, academic books and country experts' opinions. Furthermore, such guidelines can be used throughout the refugee status determination (RSD) process in order to support assessments on whether the claimant's fear is well founded and to evaluate the risk for potential return to their country of origin (Vine 2011: 10).

According to the *Media in Cooperation and Transition's* (Fiedler et al 2016) executive summary on 'Syria Audience Research 2016', Syrian people have access to different news sources including television channels, websites, mobile news, newspapers and radio. As expected, newspapers, mobile news and radio are more accessible in government-controlled areas, while Syrian TV is slightly more accessible in contested areas. In particular, radio programming, newspapers and TV stations are dominated by pro-government news resources across all regions apart from Aleppo which hosts a mixture of pro-government and opposition channels (Fiedler et al 2016: 7). Such an acknowledgement is echoed by Youssef's rejection of the National television and radio channels due to both services being predominantly controlled by the government. Equally, this statement shows the shift in media consumption as more individuals access online media through their smartphones in order to stay informed about current affairs in the UK as well as in their home-countries, as not everyone has access to a personal television or laptop. The majority of the participants explained that they regularly access particular online publications in order to keep in touch with 'things back home' and know what is happening in the UK, especially migration-relates news and Brexit developments. As Lina explains, she uses her phone daily in order to read articles and watch news videos:

I find out about what is going on in the world through my phone. I read articles from British papers, European websites as well as national news (Albania). This helps me understand what is happening and also it shows how different news can be in different countries. **(Interview response)**

Another female participant, Elina, explains that since she arrived in the UK she no longer follows national news and only reads British newspapers: 'Since I came to England I don't watch (Albanian) news at all because I don't want to have this connection.' Elina, as well as other female participants from Albania, has tried to cut all ties with her home-country as she wants to leave behind her past lives because it can be 'extremely hard' and 'upsetting'. Elina's

experience supports our understanding of how individuals cope differently with what has been left behind dependent on their reasons for leaving.

Returning to Youssef's interview response, understanding the extensive media documentation of the Syrian civil war will provide a context to further understand the importance of proving authenticity and an explanation to why Youssef was being tested to establish whether he 'really' is from Syria and whether his persecution is also 'real'. Youssef's statement of his country of origin becomes constitutive of his identity as a refugee, as well as potentially acts as a legitimisation of his presence in the UK.

According to Home Office data, asylum applications in the UK increased by 41% to 36,465 in the year ending June 2016 (Home Office 2016). In particular, in the year ending September 2016, a total of 2,012 asylum applications or an alternative form of protection was requested by Syrian nationals. In addition, a total of 2,682 individuals (including dependents) was granted protection under the government's 'Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme' (VPRS), launched in January 2004, which on 7 September 2016 expanded in order to accommodate a total of 20,000 Syrians in the UK by 2020 (Home Office 2016). The political situation in Syria has been widely reported in the media, establishing a public perception of Syrian refugees and an awareness of their 'legitimised' need for humanitarian protection. Such an emphasis on Syrian nationality as a marker of credibility can also be seen in the following image (Figure 33) of British newspaper's Daily Mail's frontpage, which states that '4 OUT OF 5 MIGRANTS AREN'T SYRIANS.' The underlined, capitalised word 'AREN'T' reinforces public opinions according to rising numbers of 'economic migrants' are taking advantage of the Syrian crisis in order to relocate in Europe, who in contrast to Syrian nationals are traveling from countries that are considered 'safe.'



Figure 31: Daily Mail front page reflecting public opinions about economic migrants taking advantage of Syrian conflict in order to relocate in Europe.

The arrival of Syrian refugees in the UK seems to present the characteristics, identified by Wright (2004), as criteria for a refugee crisis to acquire significant media coverage: 'great dimension of the event, connection to the Western interests and potential for producing dramatic imagery' (Wright 2004: 9). The Syrian refugee crisis has been defined as the worst humanitarian crisis since Rwanda (UNHCR 2016) and has been widely documented including graphic content of bombarded cities, children victims, bodies (See Paterson 2014). The media's legitimization of Syrian refugees' claims, rests primarily on portraying their vulnerability and lack of choice, thus proving their 'right' in claiming asylum.

In their work on asylum recognition rates in the top European Countries, Burmann and Valeyathepillay (2017), examined how individuals from war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, had 'higher chances of being recognised as a refugee than asylum seekers from Kosovo and Albania, countries which have recently been listed as safe countries of origin in some EU countries' (2017: 49). The relationship between the Home Office's official guidance and asylum decisions featured highly in participants' narratives, who commented on the links between official guidance and asylum claim success rates. In particular, Lina reflected on her own experience of seeking asylum in relation to not being 'recognised':

People don't believe that I need asylum because I am from Albania and Albania has this image of a 'safe' country which treats people well, which is why Home Office does not recognise our situation. If you look at our media, there is no mention of women's situation, so how would people know? **(Interview response)**

Meru also explained that due to lack of information about Albania, individuals face a higher risk of being rejected:

All the people that try to go somewhere to seek asylum they don't get to stay. There was this family that tried to go to Germany, but they were refused and sent back to Albania. After a week the husband killed his wife and threw all her things from the fifth floor (...) But you don't hear these stories. Home Office say that they have reporter in Albania who says that the situation is quite good. **(Interview response)**

The following drawing (see Figure 32) was produced by Rana during a workshop session. She created an autobiographical drawing of her past experience as a legal assistant and an advocate of human rights. In her own words: 'I used to be an assistant of lawyer so I have a better understanding of how they system works here. For some of the ladies I help it is completely new and they don't know what to do in order to help their cases.'



Figure 32: 'R'. Autobiographical drawing produced during workshop.

Equally Meru, also from Albania, described how despite having evidence of physical abuse on her body her claim still has not been recognised while also comments on how individuals may live in order to secure asylum: 'Some people take asylum very easy even when everything they say is lies. Me, I have so much evidence but not accepted, they just leave me waiting.'

Meru's claim was ultimately refused on the lack of a clear justification of a fear of persecution. Meru had escaped a twenty-year long abusive relationship as her ex-husband would physically abuse her, rape her and threaten her with explosives. Despite having photographic evidence of her injuries, Meru's claim was refused on the grounds of Albania being a safe country and could therefore return to a different city in order to remain hidden from her husband. While working on her appeal, Meru had been advised to request a letter from her GP who could confirm that she was suffering of depression. Meru explained that domestic abuse was a common phenomenon and a frequent cause of death for many Albanian women:

In Albania, there are many women there that are killed by husbands. Too many even their children. They even have the court to protect them and from police. They can just kill and they are protected by court. Maybe they can go to prison for a year or sometimes they say it was woman's fault she did something bad. It is hard for ladies there but last years it became really bad (...) Some people take asylum very easy even when everything they say is lies. Me, I have so much evidence but not accepted, they just leave me waiting. **(Interview response)**

Despite Meru being the 'expert' of her experiences, her nationality served as an excluding circumstance deeming her 'undeserving' of humanitarian protection according to the Convention's requirements. Within the asylum process, Meru's story became separated from her lived experience; an object that needed to be 'spoken for, weighed up and assessed' by others, who were recognised as legitimate (Hebing 2009).

Ibrahim's interview response below outlines how his chances for asylum changed, following an official recognition of Eritrea being a country of risk by the Home Office in 2016. Ibrahim's

appeal (following first refusal) coincided with the Home Office's revised policy on Eritrean asylum seekers, recognizing that Eritrean nationals were fleeing their country due to risks of persecution and serious harm (Government Document 2016). In particular, the Home Office's revision of guidance documents occurred following an Asylum and Immigration Tribunal legal ruling that identified risks of serious harm and requested a revision of existing guidance on dealing with participant claims. In Ibrahim's own words:

Everyone knows about Syria, people talk about it all the time and you see the news and media. When I first asked for asylum they said no because Eritrea was not a 'dangerous' country. We were a group of eight and they rejected all of us. When we came back for the second time the Home Office said yes, because the system had changed. So, they believed us. **(Interview response)**

Such an understanding of official recognition is also described by Youssef himself who commented on the role of media in raising visibility of the situation in Syria and the links between rising numbers of displaced individuals claiming to be Syrians due to wide media coverage of the Syrian crisis: 'I know that many people say they are Syrian just because they know they will get a better treatment. People in the UK and the world know about what is happening in Syria and they can relate better.' The internalisation and acknowledgment of such a positive public reception of Syrians as *authentic* refugees was also addressed by Khaled who explains how individuals adopted a strategy of claiming to be Syrian as they thought it would accelerate the procedure:

Because there are many people who are Lebanese or from Iraq and they say they are Syrian and they have fake passports. They can pay for one. I saw on Facebook, a Syrian passport is the most expensive one because people pay for it to get a fake one, to say they are Syrians, because it is easier. Better opportunity to get refugee status here. For most Syrian people it is very quick, between a few weeks and a year. But for other people it could take 5 years, maybe or more. **(Interview response)**

Both Youssef and Khaled's commentary on the appropriation of Syrian national identities as a means to claim asylum by non-Syrian individuals, expresses their awareness of how the asylum-seeking process works and the role of the media in controlling cultures of (dis)belief

which have a direct impact on public and individual responses towards them. As Lina argues, through their reliance on news-sources and social media, the general public is kept informed about what is happening in the world and such public narratives support public understandings:

In the media they are talking always about Syria and that's why people feel sorry for them. No one spoke of others, so they don't know the situation. I'm not saying it is people's faults but because they don't know what is going on in these countries. Nothing is said in the news, so they should be 'ok'. **(Interview response)**

Within the timeframe of 2015-2016, given the recognition of Syria as a war-torn country, being Syrian was internalised and reproduced by asylum seekers as a potential coping strategy in order to fast-track their applications. Such an example of a learned behaviour showcases instances of individual agency as responses towards a system that determines which stories are 'authentic' or 'fraudulent' and also which are deserving of asylum. In engaging with personal stories, it is therefore important to move 'beyond the text' as Plummer (1995: 19) would argue and pay attention to the social and historical conditions that support their production.

#### 5.4 Physical Evidence: Body, gender and sexuality

According to Fassin and d'Halluin (2005), medical certification has become 'the tenuous thread on which hangs the entire existence –both physical and political – of the asylum seeker' (Fassin and d'Halluin 2005: 606). Bodies become inscribed with narratives of torture and violence, with many displaced individuals providing photographic documentation of bodily injuries, hoping it will strengthen their claims and legitimise their legal existence. In some of my earlier conversations with Khaled he showed me images of his bruised face and swollen hands after being tortured during his imprisonment in Syria. He explained that he kept photographs as evidence to support his story. Interestingly, he chose not to disclose these images during his asylum interview and instead focused on the 'facts' of his story as he did not want to 'complicate' his claim by having to explain the reasons for being imprisoned due to his refusal to join the national army service. His decision to not disclose such information draws our attention to the way in which Khaled calculated the risks associated with mentioning his decision to join the national army and instead focused on providing a more straightforward

story that did not mention his imprisonment and instead traced his journey across different countries in search of safety due to the ongoing war in Syria.

In comparison, the majority of female participants - especially those who had experienced physical abuse used photographic evidence in order to highlight their need for asylum. In particular, Meru explained how she showed photographs of bodily harm and injuries sustained by her husband as part of her claim of seeking asylum due to domestic violence and sexual abuse: 'I have proof of what I've gone through, proof of why I can't go back.' Meru's provision of proof of bodily harm emphasizes the protection gap that women survivors of gender-based violence often experience due to lack of evidence. As Gardner (2015: np) observes: 'For this reason, women are more likely to rely entirely on their own testimony in their asylum application, and thus are at greater risk of being refused because they are disbelieved.'

The importance of providing evidence was recognised by all participants, as they tried to collect evidence such as scanned documents of birth certificates, University transcripts and medical documents (e.g. mental health conditions or physical injuries) in support of their asylum claims, and in particular for appeals. Lina explained how: 'My case worker told me to try and find copies of my University diplomas and to get in touch with police station to find report of my claim when I told them that I had been kidnapped and managed to escape.' Another participant, Meru, also explained how 'they asked to show evidence of my mental health state, like a doctor's letter. I told him that I cannot sleep, eat. I feel afraid that they will come at night and take me away.'

Caleb's experience of having to provide evidence in support of his claim, differs in that his body did not 'support' his claim, and instead challenged his story. Caleb left Nigeria in order to escape persecution and in particular the death penalty, because homosexuality is considered a crime in Nigeria and the ultimate punishment is death:

I have kept my whole life hiding who I am. But here I can finally be free, and not be afraid for my life. But when they ask me why I am here, and I tell them they look at me and don't believe me. It is not my fault that my body was built this way. You cannot test being homosexual with how someone looks.  
**(Interview response)**

Caleb's interview response highlights an important point relating to 'culture of disbelief' extending to asylum claims on the grounds of sexual orientation and the centrality of 'evidence'. Although the Home Office's 2016 Asylum Policy instruction documentation on 'Sexual Orientation in Asylum claims' (Home Office 2016b) prohibits the use of stereotypes within attempts to determine a claimant's sexual identity, immigration officers may often request 'evidence' such as photographs from typical 'gay spaces' such as gay parades (see Powell 2019: np). In Caleb's case, his strong built and wide shoulders further challenge stereotypical assumptions of what a homosexual body should 'look like', as he explains he does not 'look' homosexual and when others look at him and they don't believe him.

An example of disbelief towards one's appearance was documented in the British Press in August 2019 following one judge's decision to deny an applicant's asylum claim on the grounds of not having a 'gay demeanour' as shown in the title of the article (Figure 33). The Judge also compared the case to that of another witness whose homosexuality he accepted because 'he wore lipstick and had an effeminate way of looking around the room and speaking'. The case was made public by the claimant's barrister, Rehana Popal who commented on the judge being guilty of 'a stereotype embedded in prejudice' (Booth 2019).

**Immigration and asylum**


This article is more than 2 months old

## Judge rejected asylum seeker who did not have gay 'demeanour'

Judge contrasted man's appearance with another who 'wore lipstick' and had 'effeminate manner'

**Robert Booth** *Social affairs correspondent*  
Wed 21 Aug 2019 14:33 BST

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▲ The lawyer said her client feared for his safety if he was forced to leave the UK and return to his home country. Photograph: Steve Parsons/PA

A UK immigration judge rejected the asylum claim of a man from a country where homosexuality is illegal in part because he did not have a gay "demeanour", a lawyer has revealed.

Figure 33: An article by The Guardian about an asylum seeker's claim being rejected on the grounds of his appearance and in particular lack of 'gay demeanour'.

The private and often hidden nature of sexuality complicates the elicitation of evidence within the asylum process (Millbank 2003; Brazeil 2008). As Gartner (2015) argues, personal stories are usually individuals' only evidence in support of their claims as individuals will not publicise their private lives. Furthermore, as described by Caleb, individuals may often hide their sexuality from their friends, their community or medical practitioners. According to Millbank (2005), decisions on cases of persecution due to sexual orientation and gender identity are heavily influenced by the assumption that claimants should avoid persecution by being discreet and hiding such behaviours. Such assumptions also reveal the interplay between public and private sphere, drawing attention to the construction of homosexuality as a 'deviance from the norm' (See Millbank 2005; McGhee 2004).

According to a UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (ULGIG), the refusal rate for LGBT asylum applications in the UK between 2005 and 2009: 98% refusal at initial stage of adjudication, is considerably higher in relation to the UK average rate of general claims of 73% (see Gray 2010). In the UK eligibility for asylum on the claim of sexuality was recognised in 1999, although asylum claims on the basis of sexuality were endorsed and recognised by the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1995. Nevertheless, as Millbank (2005) observes, in the UK such claims are still not explicitly recognised within the 1951 Refugee Convention categories, as part of the legal definition of a refugee, and can often result in more complex and long-term asylum claims (see Millbank 2005; Bennet 2014).

In her study with lesbian female asylum seekers entitled 'Sexuality and the Asylum Process: The Perspectives of Lesbians Seeking Asylum in the UK', Claire Bennet (2004) examined how participants experience difficulties in negotiating the asylum process while disclosing personal experiences around their sexuality in relation to the emotional impact of 'coming out' as well as the pressure of having to 'convince' Home Office staff of their valid claims (2004). Furthermore, Bennet (2015) found that participants had been asked questions about their use of sex toys and descriptions of being sexually active as evidence of their homosexuality, which indicates that within the asylum process, sexuality is still defined to a great extent in accordance to stereotypes and norms against which individual experiences are compared (see also McGhee 2004).

## 5.5 Participants' Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Asylum seekers are increasingly aware of the need to produce credible narratives that can be validated by 'legitimised' voices, such as those of government officials, interpreters and medical experts (Sigona 2014). As a response, they need to develop successful mechanisms of asylum narrative production that they share with one another. Many participants explained how they acquired information about the asylum process prior to their interview through accessing official documents for claimants or through receiving advice from individuals who had already completed the interviews successfully and had been granted asylum. According to an interviewee who works as immigration legal advisor, it is a common practice amongst asylum seekers to exchange advice especially in small geographical locations with high dispersal rates. She draws from her own professional experience in Northern Ireland:

Especially in a place like Northern Ireland, which holds a smaller asylum-seeking population, there is this whole community and people talking to each other about the process. It doesn't mean that a person is not a genuine asylum seeker or that they haven't faced persecution but there is a lot of unofficial advice that goes around. It is because the Home Office has set up this system as if it is a test, an exam that you have to pass. It is the kind of cultural norm that everyone would like to try and tell you what works and what doesn't.  
**(Interview response)**

The tendency to provide support through passing on experience-gained expertise was a common practice amongst participants. For example, Lina described how she regularly helps newly arrived female asylum seekers, especially Albanian women who might like her might not be able to speak English when they first arrive:

Claiming asylum can be very difficult here, especially since we don't know the laws. The laws here are very different from home so I like to help Albanian ladies and explain how things work. It is important to tell them how bad it is and that you need protection. We are a very small group here and we need to stay together. **(Interview response)**

Meru also described how she supports Albanian women in Stockton given her background in community work in Albania where she worked with women supporting their civic participation. As she explained:

I try to do this with Albanian community because I see that they are not involved with many things. I don't know why they stay hidden. It is quite hard to work with them because I did work with women in Albania to integrate in life especially married women. But it is hard and what I see here (...) they have lots of problems and they don't know where to go for help. **(Interview response)**

Equally, Youssef described how he received information and support from other Syrian asylum seekers in preparation for this interview:

I asked people and they said: 'You just have to answer, like short answers, don't say anymore words than the question – just answer it.' I didn't do that [He laughs]. No, I was explaining and I did the interview in English. There was an Arab speaker, he was chilling and I was talking in English. But, this might be also another reason. **(Interview response)**

Youssef was the only one from their group who decided to speak in English instead of Arabic. Although at the time he thought such an act would show his willingness to learn English and to become integrated, throughout our interview he confessed it could have complicated his claim in relation to proof of his Syrian origin as most of his peers relied on interpreters in order to 'prove' that they spoke Syrian. Youssef also became increasingly aware of the way in which his lengthier asylum narrative could be the cause of his delayed status:

But all of my other friends, who were given short answers, speaking in Arabic, like not mentioning anything, they all get their status. And we all had the interviews at the same month- just different days: 17, 22, 28. All the Syrians they had their interviews at the same time. (...) This is how everyone is getting their status. Just giving them, giving them what they want really. Maybe, I'm not sure, but we all have like specific words, like 'Why did you leave Syria?' It is this 'the free army'. I was explaining like, 'they came here', 'We went there' 'I was with the rebels' – like the first at the beginning. But like my friends

would say 'we don't care about anything'. But I said: 'I care about the revolution, we started it and need to finish it'. Like, I'm not going to lie just to get status...so yeah...Kind of regret it [He laughs] but I'm not gonna... I'll just wait. **(Interview Response)**

Youssef appears to be aware of the power dynamics between himself and his legal asylum system audience, which he believes instructs a particular question/answer sequence and a right way of telling the story: 'Just giving them, giving them what they want really'. According to Youssef, any departure from such a 'script' can potentially jeopardize one's claim, as he attributes the delay in receiving his status to the fact that he answered questions differently: 'I think this is why they are keeping me'; 'this might be another reason'. In her study with trafficked women seeking asylum in the UK, Jobe (2008), found that women's asylum narratives were often accepted or dismissed depending upon how similar they were to other stories told by women claiming asylum on the grounds of trafficking and responding to public stories of trafficking.

Equally, Youssef's story responds to an existing discursive framework that instructs particular ways of receiving and validating narratives of forced exile, which predominantly limiting notions of agency and choice (Malkki 1996; Jobe 2008). In contrast to his friends' responses, Youssef's responses during his interview reveal evidence of self-directed actions as well as an invested political and national attachment: 'I was with the rebels – like the first at the beginning. But like my friends would say 'We don't care about anything. I care about the revolution, we started it and need to finish it.'

According to an interviewee who is a former asylum case officer and solicitor specializing in immigration law, cultural norms and language restrictions are equally important in determining asylum claim credibility: As she explains:

It is really hard, quite often people will not say the worse things and that might be something that we would consider really significant- as a Western person and as somebody who is aware of immigration legal system. I obviously have a particular perspective when I'm hearing it. And also, I had a series of clients recently who've had really difficult experiences and when asked about how you're feeling they just say 'bad' – they can't differentiate whether they were

scared, upset, tired or all these different words that we know. I don't know if that's particularly with children, but it is common across Eritrean clients whereas Vietnamese clients would all use the word 'normal' when asked about how they were treated because even if they were shouted at or beaten, what we would think is terrible is normal for them as they said. If you just write that down and send it to Home Office it doesn't tell the 'full story' of what has happened to them. **(Interview Response)**

This interview response highlights the importance of the way in which a story is told -in this case using appropriate language to adequately describe one's lived experiences but most importantly draws our attention to the quintessential nature of the refugee/asylum seeker as a victim of external forces that is 'worthy' of legal protection. According to Mason (2014) in order for victims to be publicly recognisable their suffering must be recognised as 'serious enough' to be worthy of state protection (Mason 2014).

In their research with asylum seekers in the United States, Shuman and Bohmer (2004) observed how study participants produced trauma narratives that were constructed both culturally and bureaucratically in order to respond to the requirements of the asylum culture, and how such narratives had to be re-conceptualized from stories of personal violation to testimonies of political persecution and inflicted suffering. Furthermore, they observed that the trauma stories that were told were remarkably similar (2004: 397). This was also observed in Barsky's (1993) examination of asylum claims in Canadian courtrooms where he observed that the emergence of a collective, shared story was understood as evidence of fraud instead of confirmation of claimants' similar experiences. Similar to this thesis' findings, Barsky also found that asylum seekers would draw on their connections with other individuals found in camps while on transit and ask for advice on what to say.

As Walklate (2007) argues the victim category is socially constructed, therefore public recognition of one's victimhood should also be understood as responding and positioned within a particular 'hierarchy of victimisation' (Carrabine et al. 2004: 117) as seen for example in the case of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, it is a hierarchy of victimisation which is dependent on and relevant to time, visibility, geopolitics, media culture, legal procedures, and political agendas (McGarry and Walkate 2015). Echoing Christie's (1986) concept of the 'ideal victim',

individuals seeking asylum are often reduced to the category of the 'ideal victim' in order to be worthy of legal protection, an understanding which is supported by both legal and humanitarian narrative discourses as well as popular cultural and media visual imagery.

To be recognised as a victim also involves being recognised as the victim of a crime which in this case supports one's claim of being a victim of persecution, instead of a criminal figure which echoes public understandings of asylum seekers as either bogus or criminal threats. On a final note, it is important to note that becoming a victim is a complex process involving being both being recognised and accepting that one has been victimised and therefore accepting a particular label in order to be socially and/or legally/politically recognised as a victim (Walklate 2007). To accept one's victimhood also involves being assigned a particular position within the hierarchy of victimisation (Carrabine et al. 2004) which may also involve experiences of stigmatization. The experience of being recognised as a victim and the lived experience of acquiring an asylum seeker identity will be further explored in *Chapter 6* as part of an examination of the processes of belonging, stigmatization, and identification.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In discussing experiences of seeking asylum as the second-phase of their exilic journeys, this chapter has identified two principal themes associated with the asylum determination process. Firstly, this analysis has outlined how individuals recognise, internalise, and reproduce the expectations associated with producing particular legal stories in order to access legal protection. Additionally, such a finding supports a symbolic interactionist understanding of how participants make sense of their social ecologies through meaningful interaction and how they perform storytelling acts that allow them to construct the 'refugee' identity and support meaning-making through continuous interactions with others (Blumer 1969). Such a negotiation of situations occurs within the legal context in anticipation of being 'tested' against a set of criteria and potentially being penalised for not telling the 'right' story.

This analysis has also focused on how the legal system supported particular hierarchical positioning and initiated narrative self-regulation as participants described having to present an image of themselves through stories that 'adhere to a narrative form more or less dictated by the politics, laws and sociocultural leanings of host countries' (Lawrence et al 2015: 29). Participants also expanded on the need to provide evidence in support of their asylum claims

as especially in cases of traumatic events that have occurred within the private sphere, (i.e. gender violence, sexual abuse), their claims were met with disbelief.

Participants' efforts to regain normality and reclaim control over their daily lives, leads us onto the next chapter that will examine the third phase of one's exilic journey focusing on how individuals try to establish a sense of normality and safety within the communities they've been dispersed. In particular, *Chapter 6* will present narrated accounts on how participants fill their days and how they try to become prepared for 'going back to the real world' (Lina, interview response). Finally, a discussion on belonging and access as an asylum seeker will be further explored through examining lost and found forms of belonging in terms of citizenship, visibility, and freedom.

## Chapter Six: Resettlement Journeys

### 6.1 Lina's Story

I met Lina at another participant's one-bedroom flat during the first year of my investigation. I could not have imagined the level of commitment and support that Lina would show towards my research. In particular, Lina supported workshop participant recruitment by contacting individuals on her own initiative, as well as distributed information leaflets promoting this study's workshop sessions. She served as an enthusiastic source of creative ideas and was never shy from suggesting new approaches regarding the creative workshops. During an 18-month period of participant observation, I witnessed how Lina transitioned in terms of how she experienced and narrated her exilic journey through engaging in a process of re-authoring her story and moving away from the status of 'victim' towards that of a strong 'hero'.

Lina is the only one of my participants who has a physical disability as she has a physical disfiguration on her limbs. As she explains this has stigmatised her life as a young disabled woman growing up in Albania as she was not able to 'have a social life' or apply for work. She frequently described how she would spend most of her young life locked in her room - especially when her family had visitors - and was later sent to study abroad:

In Albania, people sent me to study far away from home. No one can defend you or get married to you because you have a disability. I know it is horrible to hear, but for men it is totally different. For men they are like Gods. For men if you marry seven times and divorce with ladies it is ok, you can still marry but if you are a woman you can't it is horrible. About disability, even men who have they will also feel discrimination. In Albania if you have any disability you don't have life at all. You don't have social life and even if you apply to work they are not giving you. I applied for jobs in Albania and I went to do the introduction but when the boss saw me, I walked in the office, and when he saw me he said you are off from work. I swear. It happened to me. And I said 'why?' He said 'you can't work, you have disability and you can't work fast'.

They would call me 'mistake of Allah', I grew up hearing this and people looking at me (...) I had an operation and they gave me a lot of anaesthesia and when I woke up some of my memory was lost. I was at University that time and when I woke up I could not remember many, many things. That's why I can't remember what happened exactly. **(Interview response)**

A year before arriving in the UK Lina had undergone a leg operation in Albania and due to complications with the anaesthetic she suffered extensive memory loss - which again makes her case unique in terms of her capacity to rely on memory in order to provide her story as part of the asylum process. Following her leg operation in 2014, Lina returned to her family-home in Albania where she stayed for six months until she started corresponding via Facebook with an Albanian man who lived in London and sent her a private message. As Lina explained she did not remember 'Zed' who claimed that they had been in a relationship prior to her operation. After a couple of months of communication, Lina's brother found out about their messages and threatened to tell their parents:

That person, at that time I used to have FB and he sent me a friend request. He sent me that and sent me a message asking 'do you remember me?' I said no, sorry but because I forget many things. I did not know maybe I knew him before. He said please accept me I need to talk to you and he said we had relationship and you are mine. He meant we were together. I couldn't remember anything. So, we started to talk and one of my brothers he found out that I started talking to the man and he said to me 'you need to tell him to marry you'. All the time the guy from London he was pushing me to tell my family about our relationship together and said that if I did not, he would tell them. But in our culture, it is very shame and my brother saw that I was talking to that person. Ok so I said to family and everything was ok and for example after one week my family sent me to London, after only one week. **(Interview response)**

Lina explained that she grew up feeling like a burden, which she thinks was also the reason why her family arranged her flight to the UK 'after only one week'. When Lina arrived in London she soon realised that something did 'not feel right' and soon realised that the person she was living

with and was planning on marrying was involved in human trafficking as well as illegal drug trafficking. When she turned to her family for help she was refused any kind of support and instead was told to stay with him:

When I first came here in the UK I saw the person and I didn't know him. I didn't know him. (...) I was really upset and next morning I started to see him and see things that were strange. They were trafficking people, ladies also and drugs. But they pretended like they were married to person. Afterwards when I saw what he was doing I tried many times to talk to him. I don't know because at that time I was really bad, emotionally. Definitely was drinking and not eating, it was very, very bad. I tried many times to call my family, many times when I said to my family about who he really is and what they had done. They said: 'He's you husband, you have to keep it' and they said: 'He's making a lot of money' because he sent money to my family. I feel like he bought me and my family sold me. **(Interview response)**

Lina found herself captive as they took away her passport and would not allow her to leave the house on her own. She was always accompanied by someone, who as she explained would report back to him. Equally she could not return to Albania for fear for her life as he had threatened to kill her if she attempted to escape. After five months of being held captive, thanks to the help of another young Albanian woman who was married to one of Lina's husband's associates, she managed to escape and reported the incident to the nearest police station. Lina was temporarily moved to a safe house in London where she was assigned a case worker and was provided with legal assistance in terms of next steps. Following completion of her screening interview she was transferred to Stockton. In comparison to other individuals, Lina did not arrive in the UK as an asylum seeker - instead she became one. For the past two and a half years she has lived in the North East and is still waiting for a decision regarding her claim.

Waiting for a long time for me is horrible. I don't know it is my opinion but if this country gives permission to work to people or if they give them documents it would be a good idea for them because to stay at home without doing anything is putting us in more depression. To feel like we are not good enough to do things. People just staying at home and doing nothing. If you are staying at home and have no conversations with people, the only thing you can

do is to think about the past, to think about the time that you are losing. Without hope, it is very, very horrible. **(Interview response)**

Since arriving to the UK her English has improved drastically due to the combination of College classes, volunteering and socialising, as she is focused on improving her English and helping other asylum seekers in her community. She hopes that through her different volunteering positions she can improve her possibilities of finding a job once she gets her status or get a scholarship to continue her studies. Lina has also been working closely with the local council and was invited to present her experiences as part of the National City of Sanctuary Conference in Parliament during which she spoke about the difficulties experienced by female disabled asylum seekers.

What happened to me in the past and all the things that bad person, my ex, did it was a horrible time of my life but was is good in another way is if that had not happened to me I would not have come here to have freedom, to do what I want and to have no one to control me anymore. I believe that everything happens for a reason and sometimes when you are going through a dark time you cannot see it. But we have to remember that the bad things are not forever, and they will end. Now I want different things but now I can look back and I can say yes, I was and now I am here, and I am stronger. Before I hated myself for who I am but now I've started to respect myself for who I am. **(Interview response)**

As she explains, in comparison to Albania, in the UK she feels safe and free; free to accept her disability, free to talk about her physical appearance but also free to not be entirely defined by it. As she explains she has become 'tired of seeing herself as a victim' and instead recognises her herself as a strong young woman who also happens to be disabled.

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Lina's vignette serves as a starting point in order to examine everyday narrated experiences of seeking asylum in the North East of England. In particular, this chapter provides an in depth analysis of participants' stories of belonging and non-belonging as they wait for a decision regarding their asylum claims. In particular, this chapter examines how individuals interpret,

respond and represent their new identifications as 'asylum seeker/refugee' alongside their existing identities including gender, disability and sexuality, among others.

In my analysis of experiences of belonging I have found useful Yuval-Davis' (2006; 2010) work on belonging, which has supported my understanding of how the uncertainty of seeking asylum impacts self-identification and in extension, participants' storytelling practices as individuals adapt the stories they tell themselves and others about who they are in front of different audiences (i.e. research audience, social media, diaspora and local communities, and legal context). Being identified as an asylum seeker carries its own expectations around one's 'authentic claim' to seek sanctuary as well as serves as a label that individuals internalise and embody throughout their daily practices. Ervin Goffman's work on management of stigma is particularly helpful in understanding how being labelled and identified as 'an asylum seeker' instead of a 'refugee' may involve a stigmatized position which may require individuals seeking asylum to manage presentations of themselves (Goffman 1959) in a 'favourable' way that aligns with the image of the 'good' and 'genuine' 'refugee'.

Participants' following accounts should be understood and contextualised in relation to the demographic and sociocultural landscape of Northern England – a region in which 58% of the population voted to leave the EU and a region with high unemployment, skills shortage and limited productivity (Murray and Smart 2017: 7). The North East's coal mining industrial heritage is also an important parameter when thinking of how asylum seekers are received and treated in relation to how they may disrupt the region's sociocultural fabric, while being perceived as a social problem.

## **6.2 Borders of Belonging: Identity, Labels and Stories**

Arrival in a 'host' country is often recognised as the end of one's exilic journey. In reality, it is the beginning of a new journey whose endpoint is status acquisition and is defined by precarity and ambiguity. As Fassin (2011: 215) argues, displaced individuals 'cross borders to settle in a new society and discover boundaries through the different treatment to which they are submitted.' In crossing national borders asylum seekers are faced with boundaries that define distinctive social, cultural and social spaces with specific legal, social, and cultural rights (Fassin 2012). Such rights serve as demarcating lines indicating a particular place where the asylum seeker is constructed as a non-citizen. Brah (2003: 625) defines borders as:

Arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those who they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others (...) places where claims- to ownership – claims to ‘mine’, ‘yours’, ‘theirs’ – are staked out, contested, defended, fought over.

It is the nature of the border as a matrix of power relations that is important in this discussion, and in particular the relationship between borders and citizenship, as borders serve as symbols of national identity which instruct who is *allowed* in and who *remains* out. Borders therefore function as ‘assertions of power and ownership’ (Ball 2006: 2), setting in motion processes of classification, identification and mechanisms for exclusion and inclusion. Equally, they distinguish national entities by creating and protecting imagined communities and legally-recognised subjects (Anderson 1991). Being a citizen of a nation-state implies the possession of documents that certify one’s membership (e.g. birth certificate; passport), which grant access to a range of civil, political, and social rights. As Mayblin (2016) writes, in understanding citizenship as a territorially based set of rights and privileges we are left with a clear distinction between ‘insiders’, who have full access to rights associates with citizenship and ‘outsiders’ who do not. Anderson’s work on ‘failed citizen’ and ‘non-citizens’ identified as those who threaten the ‘community of value’ created by ‘good citizens’, is of great relevance in further understanding how asylum seekers occupy a liminal space regarding citizenship - as they ‘are neither fully included nor fully excluded from the community of citizens and the rights to which they have access’ (Mayblin 2016: 195).

As Piacentini (2012) points out in her examination of asylum life in Scotland, ‘the role of the State is crucial to categorisation processes and community formation, as admission and incorporation policies not only shape who gets in, but also the quality of life of post-migration’ (2012: 12). Equally, the State’s legal apparatus shapes categories of migration, thus establishing a ‘hierarchy of immigrant desirability’ as well as grants particular freedoms and rights (2012: 11-12). In crossing national borders, asylum seekers therefore engage in a process of recognition as a ‘refugee’, which automatically places them in a ‘formal relationship with the State, in which identity needs to be reformulated in order to fit with legal definitions’ (Piacentini 2012: 4). Arendt’s (1978) work on statelessness is of relevance in understanding this loss of identity, as forcibly displaced individuals become defined by their lack of citizenship

and are dependent 'upon the recognition of one's membership' as afforded by the state (Benhabib 2004: 59 as cited in O'Neill 2018: 76).

There is therefore a direct relationship between migration status and belonging, as particular migration statuses afford particular rights and recognition. In particular, the status of the 'asylum seeker' should be understood as implying a pending recognition of one's legal identity which is still under consideration, whereas the status of the 'refugee' validates one's position as a legal subject and therefore solidifies one's position within the nation-state (See Tyler 2006). Furthermore, the identification of a person as an asylum-seeker also operates as 'an instrument for the refusal of recognition' (Butler 2002: 11) as well as a constructive articulation of national and ethnic belonging (Tyler 2006: 189).

The distance between the status of the 'asylum seeker' and the 'refugee' can also be understood in relation to Victor Turner's concept of liminality which functions as a transitional period between states, as being *in-between* phases. As Turner (1969) explains: '[L]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (1969: 95). The concept of liminality therefore serves as a metaphor for understanding the precarious and paradoxical experience of belonging while seeking for asylum.

Ervin Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, also serves as a useful conceptual tool in understanding how the 'label' of the asylum seeker affects one's sense of belonging, since being identified as an 'asylum seeker' may operate as a visible marker of difference and stigmatisation:

Bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places (1963: 1).

As Tyler and Slater (2018: 728) remind us, the concept of stigma is not self-evident and unlike all concepts, has its own history. The concept of stigma has evolved from an understanding of stigma as 'a situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman

1986), into an 'organizing concept' (Hacking 2004: 18) instructing particular ways of 'seeing, classifying and understanding a vast array of discriminatory social attitudes and practices.' (Tyler and Slater 2018: 729). Understanding stigma as a phenomenon that occurs within the social sphere and shapes social relations is of particular relevance in this discussion in understanding how the stigma of being an asylum seeker emerges within the sphere of citizenship and creates separations between 'natural' and 'unnatural' citizens, thereby sustaining a particular hierarchical structure and operating as 'a means of formal social control' (Goffman 1986: 139).

Relevant to my analysis of stories of belonging/non-belonging is the impact of stigma on two levels: first, its effect of serving as a process of estrangement that disqualifies individuals from being 'normal' (Goffman 1963: 2). The idea of normal extends to how individuals engage in the social sphere and in particular supports my understanding of how the definition of 'asylum seeker/refugee' restricts individuals' access to citizenship and in extension legal protection, civil rights and the power to defend one's rights. Secondly, stigma serves as a separation mechanism by placing individuals seeking asylum in special categories of 'potential threats' or 'victims in need' which sit outside the boundaries of the familiar, 'normal' and acceptable.

As Yuval-Davis (2011) notes, 'Belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way.' In the case of seeking asylum, belonging 'is called into question' (Nunn 2017: 3) as individuals learn how to navigate being part of a new social fabric and experience particular social bonds of membership and exclusion that become manifested in structures, practices and encounters with other individuals and communities. Belonging is therefore inherently relational and is negotiated and embodied by individuals in relation to different social places and a wider matrix of emotional and social bonds, in which social agents have varying degrees of agency. According to Weeks (1990), belonging is a fundamental aspect of the self: 'identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others' (1990: 88).

In order to understand belonging as a process, it might be helpful to discuss the different levels on which belonging is constructed. In her book *The Politics of Belonging*, Yuval-Davis (2011) differentiates between three analytical dimensions: social locations; individual identifications and emotional attachments; and finally, ethical and political value systems. The first dimension, belonging to a particular gender, race, class, age group or nation, also implies particular social

and economic locations which are found in different locations of power within society. The difference between being an asylum seeker or a British citizen should not only be understood as occupying a different social location but also as being located differently along an axis of power. Such locations do not acquire stable form, instead they are defined by reflexivity as they are constructed in response to more than one power axis of difference, as individuals may identify with more than one identity category (e.g. gender, class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, age group etc.). This is why Yuval-Davis suggests an intersectional approach in examining social locations, that pays attention to differences in power hierarchies and imbalances.

The second dimension, involves individuals' collective identifications and their social and emotional attachments to particular collectivities. Such subjective identifications may shift over time and in different situation, but as Yuval-Davis (2011: 15) notes, they become central if their sense of belonging becomes threatened. Such an understanding of belonging is relevant to my analysis as individuals who seek asylum may experience their identifications of themselves being challenged, threatened or 'attacked', for example through racialized or stereotyping discursive practices (Wernesjö 2014: 39).

Lastly, the third dimension Yuval-Davis (2011) addresses is that of ethical and political values that are attached to belonging to a particular collectivity, either one that the individual identifies with or one that the individuals is labelled as belonging to by others. Such an assessment of where and how one belongs to different categories and identities should be understood in relation to ideological questions and the power of those who draws the 'boundaries' of belonging and non-belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011: 18).

Belonging, however also involves the ways in which social locations and constructions of individual and collective identities are valued and judged, this is a process that Yuval-Davis describes as the politics of belonging: it is 'in the arena of the contestations around these ethical and ideological issues and the ways they utilise social locations and narratives of identities that we move from the realm of belonging into that of the politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis 2011: 8). The politics of belonging also include challenges around determining what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a particular community but also the role that narratives of identity play in this. Stories play an important role in processes of belonging as people tell stories about themselves and others and these stories create an internalised, evolving story of

themselves as members of these groups, which supports their particular attachments (Yuval-Davis 2010).

In my work the relationship between identity, belonging and stories is brought into focus as I examine the ways in which individuals negotiate their new identities through the 'stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not, as well as who and how they would like to/should be' (Yuval-Davis 2006). The following sections will now provide a closer analysis of participants' narrated accounts of living in the North East of England, with a focus on obstacles to individuals' sense of belonging on an operational level, and examining how they place individuals in an *in-between* position defined by liminality and precarity while waiting for a decision regarding their asylum claims.

### **6.3 Setting the Ethnographic Scene: Dispersal to the North East of England**

According to asylum policies, individuals seeking asylum in the UK are not permitted to undertake paid employment and are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits. However, whilst waiting for the claims to be processed they can apply for financial support and free accommodation which is nevertheless provided on a no-choice basis in several locations across the UK. In the North East, G4S housing provider hold the asylum accommodation support contract (COMPASS) and have sub-contracted Jomast to act as their local private sector housing provider (National Audit Office 2014). The dispersal of asylum seekers began in 2000, responding to an over concentration of asylum seekers in specific cities such as London and the South-East (Vaughan, Anderson and Musterd 2005). Due to the Home Office's reliance on local authorities to offer accommodation, many individuals were dispersed to areas of high indicators of poverty, unemployment, economic stagnation and limited ethnic diversity (Hynes 2009; Darling 2011).

Most research participants were given shared accommodation in the cities of Newcastle Upon Tyne and Stockton-on-Tees which serve as main dispersal locations in the North East of England. However, as Sturge (2019) observes until recently the North-East region has been of the less ethnically diverse areas in the UK. According to a Briefing Paper published by the House of Commons Library, by the end of December 2018 the North East of England had the highest number of asylum seekers, across the UK, relative to its population: 1 supported asylum seeker for every 550 inhabitants (Sturge 2019: 14). Stockton-on-Tees was the second authority with

most supported asylum seekers (1 for every 215), followed by Middlesbrough (1/216) (Home Office Immigration statistics, year ending Dec 2018).

According to Netto (2011b: 299), a 'major challenge to accommodate refugees in any urban setting is increasing awareness of the distinctive circumstances of asylum seekers and refugees, compared with other migrants.' In his research in Glasgow, Netto (2011a: 126) observed that

[p]roblems such as racial harassment and abuse were more extreme in areas with little previous history of accommodating people from other ethnic groups, indicating the need to incorporate a temporal dimension in considering conducive locations for refugee settlement (Netto 2011: 126).

Zetter et al's (2005) analysis of the United Kingdom's dispersal programme concluded that the programme was failing to provide a coherent geography of support across the country. Furthermore, the 'housing market-led geography of dispersal has been argued to both isolate and marginalize asylum seekers through their association with areas of territorial stigmatization (...) and has been cited as a source of tension in local contexts often unprepared for the arrival of asylum seekers' (Darling 2016: np).

## Asylum seekers in north-east claim they are identifiable by red doors

**G4S denies 'red doors policy' as Home Office launches urgent audit after asylum seekers claim they were marked out for abuse**



▲ Asylum seekers with red doors in Middlesbrough describe abuse - video.

The Home Office has launched an investigation into the housing of asylum seekers in the north-east of England after claims that they are identifiable by their red doors.

Figure 34: Screenshot from article by The Guardian about the red doors incident published in January.

In January 2016, the issue of accommodation featured on the front page of UK Press, following an investigative piece that houses occupied by asylum seekers in the city of Middlesbrough were made identifiable by their painted red front doors (Darling 2016; O'Neill et al 2018; see Figure 34). The doors had been painted red by housing contractor, Jomast in order to better identify and monitor accommodations. Following a Home Office investigation and a series of newspaper articles, the doors were immediately repainted. The red doors incident serves as an example of the symbolic and structural violence that asylum seekers might experience as well as highlight the monitoring culture of the legal system and the subsequent hyper-visibility of individuals seeking asylum in the UK.

#### 6.4 Stories of the UK's 'Hostile Environment' in the North East of England

In discussing everyday experiences of life in asylum, processes of no-choice dispersal were identified as another obstacle to belonging, as participants were moved to dispersal locations that served as temporary drop off points, therefore denying them the chance to reach out to existing contacts. Instead, individuals described the solitary experience of making connections in a new city and learning a new language. As Caleb explains, 'I was just transferred here without knowing where they were taking me. I knew no one.' Youssef also described how he had no prior knowledge or control: 'I had no idea where Stockton was. When I arrived here I was very sick. I had hallucinations. I would see things. One of the Syrian men in my house found some medicine for me'. Khaled also described how he had 'no choice' over where he was transferred:

So, until I arrived to Stockton I had no choice about where to go. Stockton is a very central area so they send many people there, asylum seekers. And I stayed here until I get refugee status. Here in Stockton I had to wait for my full interview with the Home Office to make a decision. **(Interview response)**

Participants explained how their primary support network within the UK comprised housemates, individuals who were located at different cities and finally, their displaced families. Furthermore, they described how living in a small town in the North East region, such as Stockton-Upon-Tees, was really helpful in terms of accessing an existing transnational community of various national and ethnic communities of asylum seekers and most importantly meant that they were able to access long-term support services such as weekly

Drop-In sessions at local churches, Job Clubs and community arts-based projects. In comparison, those who lived in Newcastle Upon Tyne explained how their mobility and participation was restricted by the size of the city in terms of their lack of transportation funds: 'If you are asked to go to a community project and you have to pay £2.50 for bus ticket you will not go as that money will mean you cannot go to Tesco that day.' Equally Ahmed explained that 'I prefer Newcastle to Stockton as a city, you have more options to see and do things. But how can you do them without money?'

A major obstacle to belonging for all participants was the everyday experience of living with limited financial resources as well as the lack of access in terms of professional and educational opportunities. Following completion of their asylum interview, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. Furthermore, they cannot access government-funded English language provision programmes 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) unless they have resided in the UK for a minimum of six months (Stavropoulou 2019: 96). Due to funding reductions for ESOL, applicants may need to wait for prolonged periods of time before they are able to attend such classes (Stavropoulou 2019: 96). Such restrictive policies, automatically exclude asylum seekers from full social and economic participation and can lead to individuals experiencing marginalization and exclusion (Hynes and Sales 2009). Sales's (2002: 459) delineation of the 'deserving' versus the 'undeserving' is particularly relevant in understanding how asylum seekers are casted as the 'undeserving' (e.g. limited access to welfare services), while also being denied the means (employment) to join the 'deserving' (see Mayblin 2016). All participants described how their reliance on their weekly allowance restricted their day-to-day life in terms of what kind of activities they were able to afford. In the words of Lina:

Because here it quite difficult for us, for example to wait for Monday to get the money, the benefit they are giving, 37 pounds they are giving they are not enough. We are like women, we need many things. It is horrible to think that you want something to eat but you can't buy it. You want something to drink but you can't buy it. Money it is not enough and you have to put money on your phone. You have to buy clothes, to travel, to go to hospital. **(Interview response)**

Rana also described her inability to do things: 'The project officer from the ladies' group told me about an arts and craft event but I told her I cannot go. I don't have enough money.' Equally Caleb identified how a lack of status instructs a different treatment, that of a non-citizen:

It is not as simple as people think, not without your status (...) asylum seekers should be treated like every other citizen in this country and that is not the situation. You cannot work, you cannot go to school, you are just on five pounds per day, most importantly you do not know when you're gonna get out of it. You cannot plan. I have been an asylum seeker since the 2nd of December 2013, this is 2017 and there is no [Ten-second pause] I don't know how soon the matter is going to be resolved. This is what asylum seekers are going through. And amidst of this fear of you might be sleeping in the night, and they come like thieves, in the night. They come like thieves in the night, to find asylum seekers and to take you to the airport. So, when you sleep, you sleep with one eye open because you just don't know. Every day you go through this.

**(Interview response)**

A continuous fear of looming deportation was also described by Meru who explained that: 'At night you never know what may happen. What if they come and get me and send me away?' Equally, Rima explained how she would never stay alone at the house without her daughter and would always sleep with her phone and coat next to her bed in case they had to escape in the middle of the night. Some respondents spoke about having to be ready as a coping mechanism to feel more in control of their current situation: 'I might not really have any control over what they do but I try to be ready.' Although individuals talked about losing control over their lives they also exemplified agency as they found coping mechanisms and strategies in order to regain some sense of control over their daily lives.

A recurring issue that emerged in this ethnography was the recognition of shared accommodation as a non-safe space as it served as a reminder of the possibility of detainment, deportation and sudden removal. In their research with female asylum seekers and refugees in Teesside, O'Neill, Mansaray and Haaken (2017) reflected on how research participants talked about how public spaces were thought as offering more protection in comparison to domestic spaces that were impregnated with the possibility of sudden visits by housing accommodation representatives (2017: 219). Such a concern was also expressed by Meru who explained that

individuals living in accommodation provided by housing corporations such as G4S and Jomast, have 'no say' in their housing conditions, as she explained that 'they say you are lucky to have a roof and so you cannot complain.' In particular, Rana shared her initial impressions of her new accommodation in Stockton Upon Tyne after being detained in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre and her decision to clean and organize the house in order for it to become a 'proper place to live in':

When I came here, the house it was horrible like I went to storage space not house. I thought am I at house or storage? The guy from Jomast laughed and said 'say you are here, you have a roof'. Alright, I just went inside for one week. It was horrible and I called the guy and said may I do some rules for the house? Because I can't stay like this. So, I spoke to the ladies and said we wash everything, clean, tidy and the house became nice. We had good relationship with girls. **(Interview response)**

For some individuals, and predominantly amongst female respondents, cleaning and tidying up their shared accommodation was a priority in trying to establish a sense of belonging. They were able to find decorations, bed linen and posters at make-shift 'free-shops' at local churches as well as charity shops. Rana's experience was common amongst female participants, not only in terms of the state of their shared accommodation but most importantly the way in which they were treated with disrespect when communicating concerns or requests. Such behaviours should be understood in relation to expectations of asylum seekers' de facto 'gratefulness', which consequently restricted their right to demand proper living conditions. As Rana explained: 'In their eyes we are just file numbers, we are not clients or residents. We are just filling rooms.' Participants explained there was 'no space' to talk back or to defend their 'basic right to a safe room.' They also revealed how sharing their room with a cultural, ethnic or religious 'stranger', impacted their well-being and was perceived as a 'constant risk'. For Meru, living in shared accommodation served as a day-to-day reminder of a potential deportation but also impacted her well-being and sense of privacy:

You never know who might be knocking on the door and what they want when they come in. Next time maybe they come for me (...) It is really difficult to stay with many people in just one house. I live with eight people, it is difficult but when can I do. I share a room. I am not a young woman, I need my time and

space. You need to change, be alone, you look for alone time. **(Interview response)**

Meru's account reveals the embodied impact of structural violence in regards to her lack of citizenship. Meru's account also highlights how her age affects her tolerance of shared room policies as she finds it difficult to live with someone else and be deprived of any alone time. Equally, Lina described how she felt she was treated as a 'nobody' and had no power to communicate any concerns regarding her shared accommodation as the property's corresponding G4S housing officer threatened contact the Home Office to make an official complaint and to request her transfer to another property further away. In her own words:

I told them about my roommate and that she was threatening to hit me and he said to stop complaining. I called him again on phone to say that the situation was bad and he said 'There's nothing I can do. If you want you can move, stop calling otherwise I will call Home Office and say you are causing problems in the house.' I need to live close to city centre because of my disability. I can't walk for too long, I get very tired. **(Fieldwork notes)**

The majority of participants described how housing officers would either dismiss their complaints or threaten to contact the Home Office and report them. This was particularly prominent across female participants which again draws our attention to the gendered experience of seeking asylum and how gender impacts individuals' treatment and recognition within the immigration system. Such a 'culture of intimidation' by housing providers was also addressed by the Refugee Council as part of a national campaign in 2017 raising awareness about the living conditions of thousands of asylum seekers and demanding revision of housing conditions. The story was also picked up by various newspapers including *The Guardian* which conducted its own report based on thirty-three newly arrived interviewees and *The Independent*, which published an article on G4S wrongful treatment of asylum seekers. Although initially Lina was quite concerned about approaching her case worker and informing her of her housing problems, after a violent incident which involved the police, her case officer was informed and after a formal complaint, Lina was offered a single-bedroom. As she explained:

Many people want to say things, but they feel scared to say things because if you complain about something you might flag our case for the Home Office and it happened to me with my landlord because I refused to do what they want.

**(Interview response)**

They think because we are asylum seekers we don't have rights, so they treat us like garbage. **(Participant's words, Fieldwork notes)**

Participants also described how the Home Office was 'controlling' and how it served as a monitoring mechanism that restricted their everyday activities as well as their right to freedom of speech. The use of the word 'garbage' captures a common feeling of being treated differently or 'as not good enough', as well as highlights the underlying threat of being 'disposed' as individuals live with the constant fear of detention and deportation. They also explained how the Home Office, monitors mobility through obligatory reporting practices to the UK Visas and Immigration Agency (UKVI), a division of the Home Office. Caleb described how he had to travel a long distance to Middlesbrough in order to sign in, which also impacted his financial situation: 'I report regularly to the home Office, I make the journey to Middlesbrough every week and that is one of the ways to keep me in touch with the authorities, travelling every week to the office.' Having to travel in order to report, sometimes in distant locations was a key issue as it depleted both weekly allowance as well as mental strength reserves.

Ines Hasselberg's (2014) reflection on reporting as being 'located at the intersection between deportability and deportation' (2014: 472) is particularly relevant in understanding how such a practice serves as an obstacle to belonging as it traps individuals in a continuous state of liminality (see also Hasselberg 2015). Lina described how she could not visit her friends in London in case her case worker would visit her unexpectedly. During several of our research meetings, Lina would mention how her case worker had 'dropped by' earlier that day without telling her in advance: 'I know she was testing if I was there. She would call me suddenly and say 'are you free to meet up?'' Youssef also explained how he felt that the Home Office's regulations were designed in such a way to 'track your every step', starting with asylum seekers' application registration cards (ARC):

But now there is, you know the ARC cards? I'll show it to you, the one we take money through the post office. Now they are giving new cards, it's green, it's

like any credit card, you can use it at any shops, any ATM around the UK, but they are tracking you. Like you can take it from Manchester, but they will send 'What are you doing in Manchester?' Yes, because the idea is that it is a small prison, till we get the ID. Yes, we can go wherever we want but we are not allowed, every step is illegal. **(Interview response)**

Youssef's description of life in asylum as a 'small prison' captures this state of continuous surveillance, monitoring and restriction, as the condition of seeking asylum sets physical as well as emotional constraints. The presented subjective accounts communicate the everyday experience of UK's hostile environment maintained through the application of increasingly punitive policies and stricter monitoring mechanisms as the ARC cards accomplish the same result as electronic tagging. Youssef's account and in particular his use of the phrase 'small prison', also reveals how his status as an asylum seeker robs him off his right to a private life. Furthermore, his emphasis on how any action that disrupts or challenges the system, is deemed 'illegal', reinforces internalized discourses of asylum seekers as 'potential threats' or 'criminals' that need to be detained and controlled.

Piacentini's (2012) concept of 'asylum consciousness' also serves as a useful concept in understanding Youssef's and other individual experiences. Piacentini defines asylum consciousness as 'an awareness of the social distance that separates asylum seekers from the 'rest'' (2012: 13). An asylum consciousness therefore encompasses a collective and individual understanding of 'a shared fate in the country of asylum' which is defined by one's inability to fully access social, economic, political and cultural national spaces (2012: 13). Nevertheless, despite similarities across participants' subjective accounts, all narrated experiences are unique as all asylum trajectories are shaped by each person's unique background, personality traits and biography. The following section will focus on how individuals experience uncertainty and reflect on the experience of waiting as a quintessential feature of asylum-seeking journeys.

### **6.5 Life in between: waiting, coping with uncertainty and 'lost time'**

Following completion of their substantive interview, most participants had been advised that they would receive an answer within 6-12 months. Nevertheless, for the majority of this study's participants - apart from the individuals who have been granted asylum through the

Government's *Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS)* - the average waiting time has been 2.5 years and has been described as a long and 'unsettling' experience. Such a term was employed by Youssef during one of our many conversations while critically questioning the bureaucracy involved in asylum-acquisition: 'How can we feel safe when we are going through such an unsettling process? When we don't know what will happen next?'

In their research with asylum seekers in Glasgow, Richards and Rotter (2013) examined how participants reported an initial relief as they successfully entered the UK, which nevertheless was soon replaced with uncertainty as they realized that there was a high possibility that they would not be granted protection or would be returned to their countries of origin UK (2013: 4). In his study with asylum seekers in the UK, Giametta (2015) also found that respondents' experience of disbelief impacted their sense of belonging due to 'a system that does not believe them and that makes it very hard for them to feel that they can belong to British society' (2015: 64). Similar accounts of a system of disbelief and a testing culture were revealed by participants in *Chapter 5*, as individuals explained how they felt 'tested' during their interviews.

Before arriving to the UK, most individuals had an understanding of the UK as a country with an established Human Rights legislation that safeguards human rights and offers sanctuary to displaced individuals which is why the vast majority of informants believe that by coming to the UK because they would be 'safe' and 'free'. Nevertheless, during their interviews, participants reflected on how their initial relief and expectations of receiving sanctuary, was replaced by uncertainty in terms of the outcome of their claim, and worse still, not having any reassurance about how long they would need to wait. As Lina describes, the reality of seeking asylum has been completely different to what she had thought:

I really don't understand the system because they are thinking it is better to keep us on benefits than to give us right to work. Because if I worked I would have money, I would pay taxes and I would not need benefits. (...) I am thankful that they support me, they give me accommodation, benefits but I am not happy with waiting for a long time. **(Interview response)**

Lina communicated a common reflection on the discrepancy between individuals' expectations prior to seeking asylum and their actual lived experiences. Amin also explained: 'We are here but at the same time we are not here yet. We need to wait for refugee status.'

Participants who had been waiting between two to five years, described how they were not able to move on with their lives due to their lack of refugee status. The centrality of status acquisition as a prerequisite for individuals to resume their lives was captured in the following collage created by Nadia (see Figure 35). The text reads: 'My world is incomplete without my daughters. I am desperately waiting for postman who can bring life changing letter for me. Hope everything go well.'

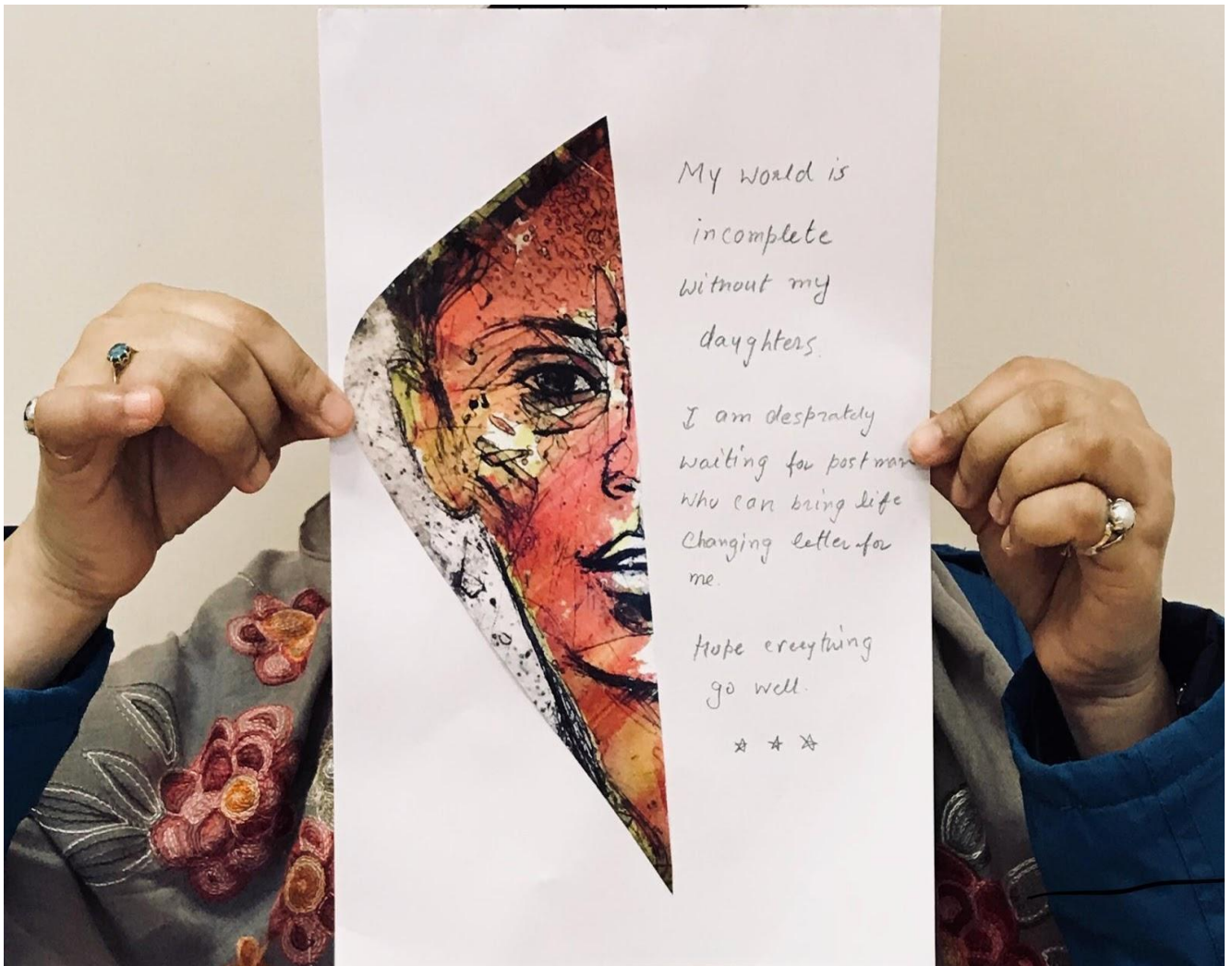


Figure 35: Participant being photographed with her autobiographical collage during workshop session.

Nadia explained how difficult it is for her to live away from her daughters. She hoped that her asylum claim would be successful so she could request for her daughters to join her in the UK. The drawing of half a face symbolises her sense of being divided in two: 'One piece missing because I don't have my daughters with me.' In line with Brekke's (2004) research findings on

asylum seekers' experiences in Sweden, participants expressed concern regarding the inconsistency in length of asylum claims as some of this study's participants received answers within a year of their claim while others waited up to seven years. Lina, who has been waiting for approximately three years, explained: 'It is so difficult not being able to move on with my life. I suffer from depression and waiting is really bad for my psychology'. Another participant, Sanya described feeling 'empty' as she wondered 'what would happened next?' Her drawing (Figure 36) shows a woman crying and underneath her tears you can see the words 'Uncertain Future.' 'This is me everyday' she explains, 'I don't know what will happen next, I am afraid of the Future. You can only see one eye, the one that is crying. The other one is hidden because I cannot see what will happen' (**Photo-elicitation response**).



Figure 36: 'Unknown Future'. Participant-produced drawing of her experiences of waiting for a decision regarding her asylum claim.

For Meru, the process of waiting has also impacted her mental health as she described there were days when she could not leave her bed and her housemate had to 'get her up':

Me, sometimes I want to stay in my bed. Even when I am very sick [depressed] she comes and gets me up and she takes me out for a walk (...) Even now I don't forget my story. What happened. For that I came here but now I am waiting. **(Interview response)**

Caleb, who has been waiting for a decision regarding his asylum claim for seven years, referred to the immigration process as 'second-phase trauma':

Somebody told me, sometime last year 'the immigration system in the UK is torturing times two. You leave your country because of being tortured, physical torturing and this [here] is mental torture.' So, you are coming, you cross over, you get to the Entry Point in Heathrow, Calais, in Dover, wherever and people will say 'yeah, we have arrived', but it is just arrival into the second phase of the trauma, and that is what the UK system gives to people. **(Interview response)**

Caleb's interview response highlights a shared theme across participants' accounts. Participants described how their expectations of receiving sanctuary were different to the lived experience. For example, Lucas explained how he received a different 'welcome' as he was detained one week after his official claim:

Before I arrived, they told me: 'You will be safe, so all you need to do is go out and claim asylum and you'll be protected', but from what I experienced was that I was taken and put into a different prison while I was seeking protection. **(Interview response)**

Lucas also reflected on the length of waiting time and the effect such a prolonged delay may have on individuals:

It's ok obviously people when they arrive they first feel shocked so if you were able to work maybe at first you wouldn't. Because when I arrived at first, mentally I was feeling...I was not ready to work. But for those who are at least at the level where they can do that, I think they should be given the opportunity [to work]. I understand that for three to six months people can wait but to go a year, two years without work that is quite difficult. Some of the skills that you have gained, your education if you don't do something you lose your motivation because you are stuck. You become lazy, I think what they are doing is encouraging people to be lazy they should be encouraging people to do the opposite. You need to allow them to do things. **(Interview response)**

There is a growing body of literature arguing that the health status of asylum seekers deteriorates following their arrival to UK and this is due to socio-economic and environmental circumstances (Chouliaraki 2012; Rechel et al. 2013). Mitchell (2001) reported that asylum seekers showed similarities to other excluded groups, while Karmi (1992) suggested that asylum seekers not only suffer from psychological and physical problems related to persecution but also due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with British systems, unemployment and potentially poverty. In particular, Heeren et al. (2002), found that trauma-related mental-health disorders were strongly linked to resident status as asylum seekers in Switzerland with longer waiting periods were more likely to suffer PTSD in comparison to those who were granted refugee status earlier on. Similarly, the rate of depression among asylum seekers was nearly twice in comparison to legally recognised refugees. The majority of this study's participants described the actual experience of seeking asylum as more challenging than expected, as they were not aware of the potentially lengthy waiting period prior to their arrival. Furthermore, they added that they had to rely on individuals who themselves had already experienced the process for advice regarding non-governmental support and free legal aid.

The theme of precarity was visually captured by Aayansh who produced a series of photographs as a response to this study's participatory creative sessions. Responding to the creative brief of 'visually representing your experiences of seeking asylum in the North East of England' Aayansh shared the following image of Newcastle's Millennium bridge (Figure 37 below) as a metaphor of his personal experience of the asylum procedure. Aayansh explained

that his image and accompanying reflection sought to communicate the process of waiting as a transition from having no status to being legally recognised as a refugee. In his own words:

For me the bridge is a symbol of our new home, Newcastle Upon Tyne. A city that my family and myself now call our new home. A city where I don't need to fear for the lives of my family. The bridge is also a metaphor, a metaphor for our journey to the UK. Bridges take us to places, you cross them. They are access points but also restrict people from crossing to the other side. Before coming here, we thought that claiming asylum would be easy, but it also has many 'no entry' points. **(Photo-elicitation response)**



Figure 37: 'The Bridge'. Participant-produced image representing the experience of seeking asylum in the UK.

Aayansh described the legal process as crossing a bridge which 'promises to bring you to other side- but has many control points. It is a two-way bridge and sometimes it can refuse entry (...) We are still waiting, what else can we do?' Aayansh's understanding of the dual role of the bridge as an entry point as well as a mechanism for separation, echoes Georg Simmel's (1909/1997) essay *Bridge and Door*, which explores bridges and doors as instruments of separation and connection:

In the immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intellectual sense, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate (Simmel 1909/1997: 66)

This duality also extends to the asylum determination process as an ambiguous and liminal space that can either serve as a bridge to safety, a new life or as a door that closes and leaves some outside. His use of the words 'entry points' draws attention to the role of asylum determination as border control mechanisms. According to Puumala et al. (2018: 197), the 'asylum determination process is a way of enacting the biopolitical practice of the border, where a person's rightful presence and access to rights in the receiving society are determined.' In waiting for asylum, individuals are therefore found in a constant state of waiting for something that is not immediately accessible but *might* be in the future (Rotter 2010: 160 my emphasis; Stavropoulou 2019: 101).

According to Hage (2009: 2) waiting 'involve[s] a large degree of passivity: things are beyond our control, out of our hands, and we can 'only wait' for what we wish to happen, as opposed to actively doing something.' Passivity is a key area of focus within forced migration studies, extending across different phases of the 'refugee experience': waiting within refugee camps, detention centres (Agier 2008; Turnbull 2016), as well as has been a topic of critique concerning the passive waiting of asylum seekers as they wait for a decision and the need 'to present themselves as passive victims, grateful for being granted whatever minimal tolerance they are shown' (Schuster 2011: 402 cited in Rotter 2016: 87).

Within the asylum procedure, time functions as a symbolic border that differentiates between being in limbo and being able to lead a 'normal' life again where planning, transitioning, and having future prospects can be a possibility. In her research with asylum seekers in Scotland, Rotter (2010) observed how the use of the word 'normal' occurs throughout narratives of waiting in order to distinguish between their life during pre-migration and while waiting for a decision regarding their asylum claims (Rotter 2010; Brekke 2004). In Griffith's (2014: 15) words, waiting is linked with different forms of 'temporal uncertainty' which traps asylum seekers 'in a passive and desperate state of continual transience and uncertainty.' Nevertheless, in comparison to narrated experiences of waiting as 'passive, empty, 'devalued' time' (Rotter 2016: 88), participants also described how they decided to not wait and instead become involved in their cases through accessing different resources. Such narratives of resistance will

be explored in the following section, outlining the potential for exemplifications of agency always dependent on individual's unique situations and available social, cultural, legal, and narrative resources.

## 6.6 Choosing Not to Just 'Wait': Taking Action

As established in *Chapter 5*, the asylum process can be a very stressful experience for individuals seeking asylum. Participants, described a sense of loss of control over their lives which made them feel 'weak' and 'lost.' Besides impacting mental well-being and emotional state, uncertainty can also determine individual decisions to invest time and effort in the present (Richards and Rotter 2013). For example, Atfield et al. (2007) found that asylum seekers in the UK felt there was no need to invest in creating ties with the local community due to their precarious status. In contrast, many participants, developed particular coping strategies that allowed them to survive the bureaucratically-induced uncertainty (see also Richards and Rotter 2013: 4). For example, some participants tried to reclaim some sense of control in terms of actively collaborating with their case-workers and/or by approaching local MP's and advocacy refugee support groups. Lina described how she regularly worked with her case-worker in terms of collecting documents that can support her claim:

I can't just do nothing, I always check with my caseworker and try to find documents she needs, for example my University transcript or medical papers from my operation in Albania. I am tired of waiting, I've been waiting for so many years and still no answer. I can't wait to start living again. (**Fieldwork notes**)

Similarly, Lucas also described how he pursued his case with his caseworker and even suggested a course of action:

What happened after the Home Office (HO) did not give me a reply. So, I was still in the limbo and so it is only in September that I started to question my solicitor to do something because I was just waiting for the interview, but it might never come. I feel that I need to contact the local MP, so she knew that I was taking things seriously because what I realised is that they were focusing

more on the illegal detention, they were not focusing on my asylum claim. That was their main interest, so I got in touch with her and she said let's get in touch with HO before we get in touch with MP. The HO said they still couldn't respond because the judge put an injunction on this case. But I knew that the injunction was lifted long time ago and from what I read from the legal documents online I knew that if you win a case the injunction should be lifted, which happened in July 2015. So, my solicitor told them that my injunction was lifted and the HO apologised and said that they should had given me an interview. **(Interview response)**

The use of the word 'limbo' by Lucas, is indicative of his experience of experiencing waiting as part of his asylum claim, however it also highlights the fact that he has internalised, and reproduced jargon and terminology associated with the legal experience of seeking asylum. As he explains, he actively accessed official documents, which were accessible online, in order to acquire a better understanding of his case and the wider legal process. His knowledge and understanding that an injunction is lifted following a successful ruling at court allowed him to influence the legal process, as the Home Office - shortly after his case-worker contacted them, set a date for his substantive interview. Another example of participants drawing upon available resources and their communication skills was shared by Youssef also described how he contacted his case worker in order to seek advice and suggested that he sent a letter to the Home Office requesting an update on his claim, although he was advised not to:

You can't get them to hurry up, the Home Office. It's not working like that. I asked one of the solicitors, he told me that if I send letter that will make them angry. I was like 'Why? I'm just asking I'm not ordering something.' I'm like. He said 'No, I don't think it is a good idea, they might get mean'. **(Interview response)**

Participants also described how they sought legal advice from alternative non-governmental organisations. For example, Meru and Meru tried to access legal support through the *Justice First* organisation in Stockton which provides support to individuals whose appeals have been rejected by the Home Office and seeking to provide support through providing research to submit further evidence or submit a fresh claim. Equally, Rima and her daughter contacted the Red Cross in Newcastle in order to arrange for a meeting to access legal guidance in terms of

appropriate evidence that would support their claim. Despite different levels of intervention by participants in terms of following up, suggesting alternative approaches or supporting collection of evidence, all participants expressed a sense of loss of control due to their legal 'vulnerability' of not knowing the particularities of the UK Immigration system and not understanding the technical terms.

In her research with asylum seekers in Glasgow, Rotter (2016: 86-87) also examined participants' experiences of waiting as a 'complex, dialectical process' which involves both a sense of empty time as well as productive time, during which individuals developed coping mechanisms and drew upon their own social capital and available legal resources. The majority of participants described a range of different volunteering experiences. For some individuals such as Caleb it was 'an opportunity to help my new community (...) The people here have received me with kindness.' Youssef also explained how: 'I was trying to help anywhere and anyone I could. I wanted to help others the same way people helped me.'

Additionally, it was also an opportunity to 'network' and 'make new friends and connections' For example, in Aayansh's case since moving to Newcastle from London in 2016, Aayansh has been actively involved in different participatory arts-projects as a participant, as well as has volunteered at different organisations including the Ambulance service and Newcastle Carers. As he explained, he is particularly passionate about the mission and work of Newcastle Carers due to his personal experience of being the primary carer of his fifteen-year-old son who has Down Syndrome.

Lina also described volunteering as an opportunity to help others the same way that she accessed help and support when she first arrived through local refugee support organisations and local groups. Equally, it was understood as a possible route into employment as she explained that she hopes that having work experience in the UK will increase her future possibilities for employment:

I have been really lucky so far. I am involved in many projects and help as much as I can. I want to work with Albanian ladies and help them as it was really difficult for me in the beginning and I couldn't also speak English well, so I can help translate documents and give them advice where to go and how

to do things. I hope that by working here as a volunteer I can then be ready in the future to work properly. I will have the experience of working in the UK. **(Interview response)**

'We can't just stay home and do nothing. Through volunteering I am improving my English and learning new skills', explained Rana. 'At least you are out there. Doing things, meeting people and learning English', explained Ibrahim.

Several respondents were therefore investing in the 'waiting time' through volunteering as that allowed them different opportunities to improve themselves and their possibilities for integration. Equally, some individuals conceptualised volunteering as 'evidence' of their effort to become integrated as participants explained how they would request letters of support from project leaders as well as community organisations. According to a long-term volunteer at a refugee support organization:

Once people start feeling comfortable with us they become more involved. We have many people in the kitchen making tea and toasties. They feel useful and they feel part of a community. **(Fieldwork notes)**

As a community project officer explained:

We get many individuals who want to become involved and help the service. And yes, sometimes they want to do that to make sure that they increase their possibilities of being granted asylum as they ask us 'will this help my case?' **(Interview response)**

Equally, volunteering served as a relief from everyday routine. Bowdenleigh (2006) found that through volunteering individuals managed to alleviate their boredom, whereas Burnett and Peel (2001) identified how volunteering allowed individuals to engage with their local communities and countered feelings of isolation and social exclusion. In this discussion, my interest in volunteering focuses not only on its function as a strategy for integration and therefore a facilitator for belonging but equally on how it is employed by individuals as a

platform for self-improvement while also being shaped by expectations of 'the good' refugee that construct particular 'role models'. The majority of participants with volunteering experience expressed a meta level discourse of the 'good citizen' which allowed a construction of volunteering as a 'technology of self, a way of transforming the refugee into a 'good citizen' (Yap et al. 2011: 161).

Similarly, to Yap, Byrned and Davidson's (2011) findings, participants constructed their volunteering experiences as a pathway to future employment, a way of supporting individuals found in the same position and finally as a way of self-improvement. In conceptualising citizenship as 'less a legal category than a set of self-constituting practices in different setting of power' (Ong 2003: 276), volunteering was constructed as an opportunity to improve one's self and construct a particular image – that of a good citizen which defies negative normative understandings of refugees and asylum seekers as 'lazy' or 'bogus'. In terms of reflecting on processes of belonging, access to volunteering also reinforces asylum seekers' lack of access to employment, therefore drawing the lines on what spaces can be accessed with nevertheless a particular set of rights, guidelines and expectations.

As evidenced across participants, levels of exemplified agency in being involved in asylum claims were inextricably dependent on individuals' education levels and in particular their English language skills. Some individuals already had prior knowledge of English which allowed them to better understand and in extension interfere with the asylum procedure. Whereas other participants explained how they had to rely on a weekly English language course and felt it was inadequate to support a smooth and quick learning process. Lima, an Iranian young woman in her mid-twenties explained how she was interested in attending free English classes as she felt that the ESOL classes provided via the local College were oversubscribed and could not attend to all learning needs.

As outlined earlier, belonging is a complex process which not only becomes naturalized but may change over time as individuals' identifications and attachments may change. Such an understanding of belonging is embedded in the following section which examines how some participants experienced paradoxical freedom as although they lost their legal status but regained different ones.

## 6.7 Paradoxes of 'Freedom': Lost and Found Statuses

Through the stories of living in asylum, it became evident that forced displacement drastically impacts the social, legal and political status of asylum seekers as well as their social relations. Individuals living in exile are found in continuous processes of world-making, having to navigate across different 'homes', while trying to establish new social ties and become part of a novel socio-cultural and legal landscape. Such a process of world-making involves the renegotiation of different identities, and particularly that of an asylum seeker. An understanding of belonging as a dynamic process located within a system of power hierarchies and axis of differences, is particularly useful in understanding experiences of belonging in relation to citizenship and how participants experience belonging and non-belonging in relation to particular markers such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, duration of resettlement and social relations.

The first thing people ask about Caleb when people find out he is an asylum seeker, is the reason for which he is seeking asylum in the UK: 'Why are you here?' As he explains, he automatically feels like he 'has to explain himself.'

Yeah, I've had reasons to tell people that I am over 2000%, not 200% not 20, over 2000% worse-off being in the UK than being in my country when in your area of economy, intellectual and other development. The only thing I feel grateful, and that I know I would not have back home, is life. Most of economically I don't have anything. I can't even take the metro. But the good thing that I enjoy here is that I have life, which I'm sure that if I had been in my own country in Nigeria, most likely I would have been dead. So that is the thing and life is very important because from when I was very young 'where there is life there is hope' so of course I have life, I believe that things will get better. **(Interview response)**

In arriving to the UK, Caleb has gained what he 'would not have back home': his life. Due to the socio-political reception and treatment of homosexuality back in Nigeria, Caleb has lived his whole life 'hiding.' Being in the UK means that he can express his sexual orientation without being afraid for his life. In his own words:

The UK is a place where I can express myself without being afraid, in that sense I have life. So that is what I'm grateful for, for the people in Britain for that opportunity but in terms of other things it's been a lot more of a nightmare and I don't know when it is going to end, this situation. **(Interview response)**

Nevertheless, in gaining his freedom and escaping the threat of death penalty, Caleb lost his status as a citizen and instead has been given a new identity, that of an asylum seeker which not only impacted his rights and civic mobility but also instructs the ways in which he is being seen as well as recognized as an asylum seeker (See section 8.6). In Lina's case such a lost and found contradiction becomes even more evident as she explained how being in the UK has given her the opportunity for the first time to be able to be free in terms of her gender and disability statuses. In arriving to the UK Lina explains how she acquired a new status as a disabled woman as back in Albania being a woman means: 'to have no social life, no rights and no power' but equally feels like she has no rights as an asylum seeker:

What I am thinking about this country is that there are women's rights, but not [rights] for asylum seekers. In our country I would feel shame. It is totally different, people here are not discriminating. Totally different here. What I was thinking is that people who have disability. There are a lot of ladies who have disability and have their stories. **(Interview response)**

A key point that emerged through Lina's interview response was her newly -found freedom to share stories of disability. In comparison to childhood experiences of repeatedly being called a 'Mistake of Allah' and being locked in her room during social occasions, Lina did not experience any discrimination associated with her disability, on the contrary she felt that she had the freedom to share such stories and re-engaged with her identity as a disabled woman in a new way:

I can do things. Here I feel more like freedom. I can be ambitious, to do things and think of what to do next. Not to feel ashamed like I felt back in my country. Not to feel like I should be locked in a room because If I'm going out I will bring shame to my family and people can look at me and say things. I had an experience when I was in Albania and children were making fun of me. I remember myself when I was a little girl and I was locked in my room because people are coming to our house. No when I'm telling that before I would cry,

now I am not crying anymore because here in this country I learned that I can be more. Many people they got disability, but they have lives, they are very intelligent, can be successful. Of course, in this country there are both good and bad times. But if I compare it, here it is much better, much better.

**(Interview response)**

**Update:** A participant-produced photograph and corresponding text have been removed after consultation with participant to safeguard participant's safety and anonymity (post-submission).

It is also worth reflecting further on Lina's distinction between gender equality and lack of equality when it comes to asylum seekers' status: 'What I am thinking about this country is that there are women's rights, but not [rights] for asylum seekers.' Lina's experiences are representative of many female participants who all explained that despite their restrictive access to civic spaces (citizenship rights) and their 'displacement' within a separate welfare system, being in the UK allowed them to regain their status as women – a status that they had been denied in their home countries due to political, social and cultural constraints.

Such an experience was unanimously expressed by all Albanian female participants. In particular, Meru explained how 'being a woman in Albania means you are a second-class citizen. You have no right, no place in society. Men are in power there.' A similar insight was offered by Meru who explained how her status as a divorced woman in Albania stigmatised her family and impacted her relationship with her older brothers who 'were ashamed' of her.

I had to leave because my husband would not leave me alone. His house was near mine and all the time he was drinking and being aggressive. Coming to my house, beating me all the time even when I was divorced. When I was divorced no one supported me. I tried to make my room in a storage unit. Sometimes he would wait for me (...) My life there was really bad. **(Interview response)**

In particular, Lina explained how female asylum seekers who had experienced abuse or had been trafficked were not 'allowed' to engage in romantic relationships while their claims are being processed. In her own words:

Many ladies hide their boyfriends because if they know you have boyfriend maybe they will not believe you have suffered or maybe they will stop giving money. But it is normal if you are all alone to want some support. We need to live normal and being in love is a normal. **(Interview response)**

According to Canning (2013) 'survivors of sexual violence are often faced with a wall of silence, be it through social stigma, shame, or fear of reporting. Add to this a perpetrator who has the power to detain, restrain, search or report you, who can exploit a fear of forced return to the country you have fled' (2013: 11). For some of the female participants who had experienced sexual violence, such as Lina and Meru, the Home Office was described as a controlling figure that monitored, tested and controlled their day-to-day lives. The cognitive and affective experience of labelling is an important element of understanding experiences of belonging, especially in relation to stigma, identification and citizenship. The following section will present participants' reflections on the 'label' of the asylum seeker/refugee and the symbolic and legal implications of such a differentiation on their experiences of belonging.

### **6.8 Stories of Belonging and Non-belonging: Stigma, Identification and Self-expression**

There is a growing body of contemporary academic research examining life in exile with a focus on experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation (Brekke 2004; Valenta 2008). In particular, a number of studies have identified how experiences of everyday life stigmatization may play a catalytic role in processes of belonging as they may lead to withdrawal from social interactions within the host society (Valenta 2009) or sustain dreams and hopes of a future return to one's home country, therefore constrain motivation for full integration.

Many participants explained how their status as an asylum seeker served as a permanent symbolic marker of their 'otherness' and pre-determined the way in which people related to them (Stavropoulou 2019: 105); which was always in anticipation of the question 'Why are you here?' or 'Are you okay? You poor thing.' As Ibrahim describes: 'For some it is different, perhaps easier but for me every time I walk on street I can feel people looking at me and thinking 'where is he from?' or 'what is he?' The majority of male participants from Eritrea and Nigeria explained how their body became an instant reminder of their 'strangeness' and a means of identification: 'they look at you as if they know you. I always try to wear nice and clean clothes so people don't look at me that way' (Fieldwork Entry, participant response). Other individuals

commented on how they felt that they could not 'escape being seen as nothing more than an asylum seeker' (participant response, fieldnotes). As Lina explains:

I feel weird sometimes because everywhere if you are to buy or ask they are asking who you are and the moment you say you are an asylum seeker, everything is changing. It is changing because people straight away we'll say 'Ah you are an asylum seeker, you haven't got the right to be or the right for this' or 'Ah poor you, you don't have this; you don't have that' maybe by mistake they are saying this every time they are saying like 'poor you' they feel sorry for us but they are not understanding that the moment they say 'poor you' they are not helping us because we don't want other to feel sorry for us. So, it is not very nice and certain people don't believe for example how we live with few money, and I tell them 'yes I can live with that and it is not enough' and they are like 'Oh my god, are you sharing accommodation? How is it sharing with someone else?' **(Interview response)**

For Youssef, the word 'refugee' is conceptualised as stigmatising as he explained it forces him to experience 'another level of humiliation', associated with the lack of particular cultural, legal, material and social resources:

You know the word 'refugee' now is all about poor, no food, no education, no money, no family. When someone says 'refugee' is torturous, it is either people hate it or people feel sorry for him. And I don't want both feelings. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me and I don't want anyone to hate me. Like, if I came here with my Syrian passport, I'm not a refugee, but because I didn't, I'm a refugee. **(Interview response)**

Youssef described the dehumanizing nature of the label of 'refugee', charged with negative connotations. The process of being identified as an asylum seeker can therefore affect the process of identity reformation, as it introduces a new feature of self-identity that individuals need to incorporate in their self-definitions. As one of the participants explained, 'sometimes it is like you have this stamp on your forehead and that is all people see.' The status of an asylum seeker was therefore described as a stigmatising identity (Figure 38), associated with

particular assumptions such as for example dependence on welfare services: 'some people when they hear that you are asylum seekers they will say 'why are you here?' and 'you are taking our benefits' many, many things like this.'



Figure 38: 'Label'. Digital image representing experiences of stigma sourced online.

Another participant reflected on experiences of stigmatization as a response to the following image (Figure 39), portraying a person's lips being covered by plasters with the word stigma written on and serving as a visual metaphor for being silenced by one's status as an asylum seeker.



Figure 39: 'Stigma.' Photograph from personal collection used as part of photo-elicitation.

In comparison, Khaled described his experience of being identified and recognized as a 'refugee' in a completely different way. It is important to note that Khaled had acquired refugee status and was therefore at a different legal and emotional place during this study:

Some people hide. Me I don't say I am Syrian, I say I am Syrian refugee. I say I am Syrian refugee, I came two years ago. I don't lie. I came to see asylum, I didn't come to study or to do anything, I just came to see asylum. That's why I came I am Syrian refugee, I will be proud forever. It's not something bad, on the opposite. Most people are brave to make that decision. **(Interview response)**

In comparison to the majority of this study's participants, Khaled acquired refugee status a year after his arrival (See *Chapter 4*), which automatically differentiates his experience of living in exile as he was able to work and progress with this life. Furthermore, his reference to Syria's history of providing asylum to displaced individuals serves as a destigmatizing tool as Khaled focuses on the concept of welcoming while addressing the precarious and unexpected nature of forced displacement:

Why I don't see it bad is because we would have Palestinian refugees and Iraqi refugees in Syria, four million and they lived between us, went to our schools. We never thought at all 'why are they here' or 'why they won't go back to their own country'. Thousands of Lebanese came to my town, we welcomed them in our homes, we never said go back to your country. Yes, to be a refugee, for us. As I said we were, our country welcome refugees and now we are refugees. It could happen everywhere, you don't know. Hopefully it won't happen to other people. **(Interview response)**

In understanding the relationship between asylum, identification and stigma it is equally important to recognise the underpinning public assumptions of asylum seekers as 'welfare cheats' who are targeting and depleting welfare services which are supported by discourses of the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' of state benevolence and the welfare bounty' (Piacentini 2012: 7; Sales 2002). As discussed in previous sections, media representations of asylum seekers not only maintain particular refugee/asylum seeker visualities but they also reproduce and maintain orientalist gazing practices, where the figure of the asylum seeker is presented as an alien body or mass of bodies threatening the dominant national imaginary body. Echoing Kristeva's concept of abjection, asylum seekers function as an abject thing, 'as a 'security blanket' for the citizen (Kristeva 1982: 136) as 'the figure of the asylum-seeker is comforting,

for the creation and exclusion of this imaginary bad object' which 'brings 'us' closer together' (Tyler 2006: 192). This moral imperative to protect what is 'ours' over 'theirs' is echoed by Azadeh how reflects on how the stigmatisation of asylum seekers is the result and basis of dominant socio-political structures which promote a nation-state approach that further solidifies the distance between citizens and non-citizens:

They've been scapegoated with this movement, that is increasing with the conservative and that national health service, the social services being cut, educational system being cut, you know housing. It's because the government is not spending enough, the money is going elsewhere and new arrivals are being blamed for all this shortage. No, you know, that's not...they did not cause this. They are hardly using any of this. It's a tiny percentage and when they are they are either in detention centres or not allowed to work. **(Interview response)**

Azadeh explained how there should be a difference between recognising 'our shared humanity and feeling sorry for stateless people.' Participants also reflected on the victimising effect of particular behaviours and words (e.g. poor you) that focus on the vulnerability of asylum seekers, feeding into discourses of the 'deserving refugee' but equally reinforcing power hierarchies within the host society and its 'guests.'

As soon as anyone sees me in every context, a visitor comes to the house or somewhere else they say 'Oh hi, where do you come from?' and I think I haven't asked you that question why should you ask me? You may not be English person, born in England you could be from Scotland, Ireland. But I don't ask you that, unless I know you as a friend so 'tell me a story where you're coming from.' They don't ask about the people. They want to know where people come from. You know I was sat at a park, the other day, sat on the bench and this man sat next to me and said and I was watching my son play at the playground and I knew he was going to say something like: 'Where are you from?' and I knew where it was leading to 'How long have you been here?' You know they want to establish whether you are using our welfare, or are you unemployed, or...you know... So, what does that got to do with you? I don't ask you these questions. **(Interview response)**

Azadeh's narrated experiences were common across other participants who also described instances of embodied differentiation during which their physical appearance or accent served as markers of difference. Her interview response captures the day-to-day lived experience of feeling othered and one's violation of privacy borders as her physical appearance automatically becomes a 'conversation starter' about her origin, underpinned by a focus on her 'right to be here.' During one of our conversations, Azadeh presented me with the image of a painting she had drawn of herself, which represents her dual identity as an Iranian national as well as a British citizen (see Figure 40).



Figure 40: Image of self-portrait created Azadeh as part of her personal creative practice as an artist. Thank you to Aleksandra Dogramadzi for the digital copy and special thanks to Azadeh for her permission to include this image as part of my thesis.

Through her painting, she engaged with the process of having two identities, two homes and two cultural heritages. In selecting a photograph of an autobiographical painting of herself, she captured the complexity of the refugee experience while emphasising her right to 'hold onto her heritage' and embracing it as a unique particularity of who she is, rather than an obstacle to belonging.

As she explained, through the image she is capturing herself:

The way I represent myself there is I made sure I was standing up right, I was facing the audience so I wanted my head up, with a smile. I was proudly standing holding my passports and my two nationalities. **(Photo-elicitation response)**

Azadeh's upright, forward-facing body stands at the central point where the flag's lines end as she explains 'I wanted to be in the middle so there's two halves of me. I am Iranian-British.' For Azadeh, the image is more than a self-representation; it also serves as a symbol for other individuals currently seeking asylum:

A symbol of what everyone goes through. It is not just about me but also people that leave their home and their countries and they settle down in another, find a new home. [The] struggle to find a new home again and the challenges you face no matter where you go, no matter how long it has been you still hold onto your country. The memories, the values, principles or what you've learned, you carry with you. **(Photo-elicitation response)**

Moreover, Azadeh described how through her engagement with a community arts project and the study's photo-elicitation sessions she was offered the opportunity to reflect on her own story and position her experiences within the wider socio-political framework of forced displacement:

And to say the issues are the same, even if you know from many years ago, the same issues we struggled with, they have different dimensions, different forms and it is from different angles (...) But, to show that somebody like me,

I managed to settle in this country here, I am happy here and I have my own life, they can do the same thing. So, through telling my story, I felt that I was giving hope to others so that they can also see themselves and that they can live here and challenge the issues and feel at home, feel safe. **(Interview response)**

In contrast to the majority of participants, Azadeh had a deeper understanding and more exposure to visual production methods, due to her professional career as an artist whose body of work focuses on stories of forced displacement. Nevertheless, despite different levels of creativity and familiarity with creative methods, all participants explained how using creative methods allowed them to represent themselves and their experiences. As Alena explained, 'It is not about whether you can draw, it is about being able to express yourself.'

For Sarah, the project offered an opportunity to escape from one's problems- even momentarily:

I think this project that you are performing is wonderful because it is dealing with art and painting and drawing and I think that art can help people to forget their problems and difficulties in their previous life. It is a kind of meditation, it can distract them and it can work as a kind of meditation for them and help them relax. **(Reflections on creative process)**

In their work with Burmese refugees in Northern Thailand, Prag and Vogel (2013) reflected on how the combination of photography and storytelling allowed participants to communicate and represent their experiences within a post-migration period. In particular, one participant communicated their challenging life journey through the illustration of a chili pepper, whose vibrant colour and surprising spiciness symbolized 'a sign of posttraumatic growth in a new safe space' (Prag and Vogel 2013). Similarly, through engaging in creative activities, participants discovered creative ways of understanding and representing their negotiations of belonging as well as their social worlds. It also allowed them to come together as a group and enter a shared story circle while acquiring a new sense of belonging as part of the research process:

We've been exploring through collage, through drawings. I think that this has been really special for the women. They've all said it's been really beneficial. It's been good for mental health, for memories, for exploring things forward and it's really brought them all together as a community. They've been really expressive, they've been vulnerable in sharing their stories and I think that's been really therapeutic for a lot of women and they've really just enjoyed this time of coming together and through art exploring different creative forms.

**(Project volunteer, reflections on process)**

Khaled also reflected on the power of sharing his story through a Facebook post celebrating the one-year anniversary marking his arrival to the UK. Khaled posted a first-person narrative recounting his decision to leave Syria, his dangerous journey to the UK through thirteen different countries, the moment of arrival leading up to his dispersal to the North of England and his successful trajectory of receiving his status, finding full-time employment and sharing his experiences through his different professional roles and through his Facebook account. As part of his post, Khaled inserted an online-sourced image (Figure 41) which as he describes communicates his decision to 'get up' and his decision to live as a prelude to his story of new beginnings:

What I had before I left Syria was being a law student. My dream was to become a judge and I had everything, as I said, and suddenly I lost everything. And here it was really difficult after what happened not just to lose, many Syrian people lost everything and I'm not saying I lost more than them but I mean more than others, after what happened in Lebanon and when I lost everything and after all those troubles that happened to me I said what I will do now to be like, to start new life or to accept situation and I knew I was going to go mad or kill myself because of what happened, which was really bad situation. So, I chose now to get up, as I said from under the rumbles, to start a new life. That's why as I said I started my journey. **(Interview response)**



Figure 41: Online-sourced image by Shutterstock used by Khaled for Facebook post.

Last few years I had been in a very bad situation, many things had happened made me feel like it is the end of my life. I had suffered too much, that was enough to make me decide to make a decision: kill myself or get up from under the rubble and debris. **(Khaled, Facebook post)**

There is a redemptive quality in Khaled's story as it marks a series of challenges and adversities that disrupted his 'normal' life back in Syria, which nevertheless acknowledges the personal growth that was accomplished as a result. Such a narrative trope was also encountered across other participants' shared stories of seeking asylum in the UK. In recounting the reasons that led them to the UK, they also reflected on how such challenging moments affected the way they understand their life but equally offered them a new mission that of educating others about the reality of seeking asylum.

NS: I'm doing analysis now on the spot but what made you chose the particular word 'rubbles' did it also have a connection to the bombing in Syria?

K: No, I'm talking about my life and everything that happened to me.

NS: Where did you find that photo?

K: I don't remember at all. I just googled it and I started writing once I arrived, tenth of July. I'm not good at writing, even in Arabic I'm not good I mean at creative writing or I cannot invent things like that, I don't know how.

NS: Who were you thinking when posting in terms of who would read it? Was it your friends in the UK?

K: Yes. Not my friends only but also for Syrian people. For Syrian people to encourage them and for them not to lose their hope. For English people to know why we are here and what we can do. It is a totally different subject, people keep on asking me as I said about that, some people say 'you are here to take our welfare' or 'to steal our jobs and our homes because you cannot work in Syria'. I said no, we are not economic migrants. **(Khaled, interview transcript)**

As outlined earlier in this thesis, narrative tropes of redemption, survival and success may complement as well as mirror expectations around 'vulnerability' and 'deservingness', adding another layer to participants' stories and targeting different audiences including their immediate social circle, new audiences in the UK, as well as fellow asylum seekers in the UK and potential research audiences. The multiple layers of Khaled's story and the way in which it mirrors and responds to the separation between 'genuine refugees' and 'economic migrants' can be seen through his sentence, 'I said no, we are not economic migrants'.

Such diving mechanisms can also be seen in relation to the ways in which asylum seekers themselves describe individuals who do not show initiative in becoming integrated and are therefore constructed and presented as 'bad' examples. In the following interview response, Aayansh explained how particular negative behaviours impact the way in which asylum seekers are seen and treated by their community:

It can be hard because the society is treating us like not good enough. Because what we noticed is that there are few friends, amongst the asylum seekers, they did not get any permission or passport from the society. So, what these people do most days is get drunk, because they don't have any opportunity to

go somewhere to work. They don't have any goals so what they do is sit and drink alcohol. **(Interview response)**

Aayansh described how individuals who have been denied asylum and are therefore destitute may be more vulnerable to alcohol misuse. Caleb has also described such behaviours when referring to individuals who have been waiting for more than ten years for a decision and he believes it is a personal decision to 'not give up' although a difficult one:

Cause I know many of my friends, many of my flat-mates, who have become very, very distressed and depressed and traumatized because of the situation [of waiting]. I have tried to encourage them to follow me to some of these activities because you know people are different. Different dispositions, different interests, so I can't force them to do stuff because I know the difference of staying at home. Just smoking, just drinking, just taking and smoking weed and other stuff, just to get this thing, get through this situation. So, I try to get them out of the house, let us go, let us participate but they don't really want. **(Interview response)**

Equally, when asked about the process of integration and the process of becoming involved within the local community Khaled explained that it should be an individual choice, as individuals should aim to socialize and to participate in their local communities:

Actually, I blame them. I was there, I got refugee status and stayed in Stockton and helped there. After six months I met a Syrian guy he was isolated. I knew every single asylum seeker in Stockton, everyone from different nationalities. They told me that there is a Syrian guy. I visited him at home just to see why he was alone. I can't know or say everyone is different. For him he felt shy to go to the church and meet people. Not confident. When I compare myself with other people, I said why you didn't just join? Because if you come to the Drop-In you can meet people from other countries, your country, make friends- just to not be isolated. So, it is a very big mistake for other people to be isolated. **(Interview response)**

According to Lina it is a matter of principles and also a responsibility towards their host country both in terms of how they behave as well as show respect:

Asylum seekers and refugees should respect this new country and be careful of how they treat others and behave. It is because of some people that the media and people then understand us as bad, lazy or dangerous. **(Interview response)**

Such a responsibility towards one host's country is also addressed by Aayansh who explains how 'it is our responsibility to treat this country with respect because only this way we can ensure that the waterfalls of love and kindness will continue for everyone.' Aayansh is referring to his own poem entitled 'Waterfalls of love and kindness' in which he reflects on the UK's role as a country that provides sanctuary. Following conversations around asylum, responsibility and sanctuary as part of a community arts project, Aayansh produced a short poem. As he explained his poem 'Waterfalls of Love and Kindness' reflected his family's quest for freedom and humanity and their decision to travel to the UK. He was particularly aware of those 'who are desperately looking for mercy' and who, like Aayansh and his family, have experienced hardship and violence in search of a new life.

I have heard of waterfalls of love and kindness  
But never have been there, except for a few moments in a dream  
But when my journey started I was very confident of finding these miracle  
waterfalls  
When we stepped to the land where the waterfalls of love and kindness were  
We could hear those were showering by far away from us and knew they were  
still there

Finally, when we reached those we could notice the strength of the waterfalls  
was not as strong as we thought  
But even with the low strength, love and kindness was still showering to  
people who are desperately looking for mercy  
So, we thank God for the remaining love and kindness of waterfalls, even with  
the low strength.

Suddenly, flashed a thunderous thought in an empty mind of the sky  
To acknowledge us a diamond-worth message:  
All of you must protect and care (for) all those remaining waterfalls of love  
and kindness  
You had not protected those in your lands  
And this is your last opportunity

Now all we know (is) that this message was crystal clear  
And are we ready to protect those values of this land?

Although Aayansh and his family have stepped into a new land where ‘freedom and human rights exist’, he described that it felt distant, and ‘not as strong as we thought.’ Through his poem the imagery and concept of the waterfall was employed as a metaphor on two levels: to describe this newly found freedom and to represent the concept of sanctuary and humanitarian protection on both a legal but most importantly a humane level as it flows from its source in the UK. As Berglund (2001) argues, ‘a waterfall may serve as a powerful metaphor: as it well known, the steeper and higher a waterfall is, the more energy it contains.’ (2001: 47). Aayansh chose the metaphor of waterfall because in his opinion it signifies purity and strength: ‘a natural force coming from inside earth that has the potential to travel a long way. It has a force of its own and does not stop flowing.’

In Aayansh’s personal experience however, the strength of the waterfall was not as strong as he had initially expected, which reflected his experience of asylum seekers not being able to fully engage and participate at full-strength of civic life. Aayansh therefore employed his personal experience as a testimony and an insight into the refugee experience but was also able to contribute his views on the issue while reflecting on the UK’s responsibility to safeguard particular rights and offer services for individuals ‘who are desperately looking for mercy.’ His final verse communicates the importance of safeguarding asylum and serves as a double statement in terms of its different anticipated audiences:

It is a message for countries like the UK to protect human rights and continue to provide asylum. It is also a reminder for all us asylum seekers that if we want to live in a country with these laws we also need to respect its people

and culture in order for more people to be able to come. **(Explanation about poem)**

Aayansh's response reveals his understanding of how sanctuary functions as a two-way transactional relationship between the state and asylum seekers while also highlights expectations of the 'good' and 'mindful refugee' who is respectful of his or her host country and is therefore *deserving* of humanitarian protection. Such a dialogical relationship appears to be intrinsic to processes of belonging as individuals attempt to become part of their new social collectives while simultaneously experiencing processes of othering and differentiation due to their experience of seeking asylum.

## 6.8. Conclusion

This chapter has presented how everyday experiences of life as an asylum seeker are dependent on individuals' immigration status in relation to processes of belonging within the current 'hostile environment' in the UK. and stigmatization. In sharing experiences of stigmatization, individuals reflected on how being identified as an 'asylum seeker/refugee' affects the way they are being treated by others as well as becomes part of their self-identity. Being *seen* as an asylum seeker/refugee was understood by participants as a mechanism of restricting membership while also reinforcing distinctions between 'us' and 'them'.

Participants described the precarious nature of freedom/safety/sanctuary both in terms of the end result of acquiring status but also how in becoming asylum seekers they lost their rights as citizens but nevertheless gained new freedoms in relation to their gender or sexuality. A shared experience across participants was that of waiting as a result of the asylum determination process. During that time participants offered accounts of waiting as 'wasted time' (Bauman, 2004) focusing on how such an experience of stasis affected their mental well-being. Alternatively, participants also shared stories of not-waiting describing how they became actively involved in their asylum claims while also invested in the 'waiting time' through volunteering opportunities that allowed them to develop new skills, socialise and improve their English. In identifying legal constraints and monitoring processes, individuals developed useful strategies in order to 'improve' themselves, as well as their possibilities of becoming a refugee. Furthermore, some individuals also described how their experiences served as valuable life-lessons and helped them realise their role and mission in helping others and in particular,

through the project's creative activities were offered the creative invitation to do so. Moreover, through the project individuals not only shared stories about themselves and their experiences in the UK they also acquired a sense of belonging as part of the research process and as creative producers while their visual stories opened up further opportunities for storytelling, dialogue and self-reflection.

Individuals' responses offer fruitful reflections on how belonging operates as a two-way, alternating process of inclusion and exclusion as individuals explained how they realised their role and responsibility in respecting and following the rules and regulations of their new host country. Unavoidably such an understanding may become problematic as it reinforces differentiations between 'good/active' and 'bad/passive' 'refugees'.

This chapter concludes the ethnographic journey of this investigation, leading the way into the concluding chapter that brings together the different identified themes and outlines the value of this investigation in relation to its arts-based research approach and its findings of an increasingly punitive legal system that monitors, restricts and regulates experiences of seeking asylum. What is more striking is that these subjective accounts echo a twenty-year old body of ethnographic work on asylum seekers' lived experiences, thereby confirming that the asylum system in the UK is becoming increasingly restrictive through the introduction of new regulations, policies, and monitoring mechanisms.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

But if a picture is thought to tell a 1000 words, it also masks a multitude of stories.

**Haaken and O'Neill (2014: 81)**

### 7.1 Chapter Overview

The aim of this final chapter, is to offer a concluding discussion for this study and to present the key contributions of my thesis. I begin by returning to my research questions and considering the nature, role, and complexity of the stories of individuals seeking asylum in the UK. Through reviewing my methodological approach, I then offer a number of reflections on my research's ethno-mimetic approach, while also acknowledging limitations and important ethical considerations. I conclude this chapter by attempting an 'ending' to my research story while also embracing future directions for my research.

### 7.2 'What's the Story?' | Reflections on Findings

The aim of this research has been to investigate the ways in which individuals seeking asylum represent themselves and their experiences through the stories they share. Additionally, it has focused on how arts-based methodologies invite individuals who have experienced forced displacement to reflect, interpret, and negotiate such experiences in creative art-form. A focus on storytelling has therefore been a central feature of this investigation in order to understand the social, cultural and legal value of stories, examining how individuals employ stories to address particular expectations and to represent themselves in a particular way, therefore performing particular subjectivities. When thinking about stories it is equally important to think about the role of the audience(s) and the different spaces and mediums through which they originate and become shaped by. As presented during my introduction, there are two key research questions guiding this thesis accompanied by sub-research questions:

#### **1. *How are people seeking asylum storying their experiences?***

**1a.** What kind of stories do refugees and asylum seekers tell about their lives?

**1.b.** What do such stories accomplish?

**1c.** How do such stories emerge within and interact with particular social, structural and narrative contexts?

**2. *What is the cultural value of participatory arts methods for individuals seeking asylum?***

**2a.** How do individuals seeking asylum re-interpret and represent their lives experiences through creative expression?

**2b.** Can arts-based research methods support social justice through knowledge production?

**2c.** Can ethno-mimesis offer a window to these experiences?

As I embarked on my research journey, I remember feeling uncomfortable each time someone would comment on my work by saying 'It is a good time for you to be doing this kind of research' or 'Very popular topic, you'll get lots of data.' As I struggled to come to terms with the ethical responsibility of engaging with stories of forced displacement during such a 'high-demand' period, it became clearer to me that my research was engaging with a 'story of our time'. I am making a reference to Jo Woodiwiss' (2009) work where she argues that stories are constructed in particular moments in which we place significance (see also Smith 2014: 35).

As Plummer (1995: 4) has argued, 'different moments have highlighted different stories' and 'as societies change so stories change' (1995: 79). Indeed, during the 2015-2017 timeframe of my research, stories about those seeking asylum were continuously disseminated across the media, politics, policy and popular culture. Such stories do not simply reflect the events leading up to 'European refugee crisis' but more importantly, are constructed in particular sociopolitical, cultural, ideological, historical and narrative spaces (Smith and Waite 2019: 2289-2290). The stories of individuals I had the privilege to hear and share as part of my research capture a particular sociopolitical moment defined by increased hostility, hypervisibility and prejudice that highlighted the problematic binary understanding of asylum

seekers and refugees as authentic, victims in need or 'bogus' potential threats that pose a social problem that needs to be addressed and resolved.

In my research I've engaged with both mediated and personal experiences of the 'European Refugee Crisis' in order to first understand the power of narratives in framing events and labelling individuals, and secondly in order to focus on the individuals behind the labels and their stories. My emphasis on participants' intersectional backgrounds and unique biographies is essential for my work as to lose sight of 'asylum seekers/refugees' as individuals would equal acknowledging that the term 'refugee signals a burden a victim and a threat' rather than a person 'with skills, capacities and histories that contributed to their host societies' (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007: 13). By taking a narrative approach to the lives of individuals seeking asylum and the stories told about those lives, my research has focused on how participants engage in storytelling on two levels. First, by focusing on how they construct such stories; and secondly on how their stories help them present themselves and make sense of their lived realities as 'asylum seekers/refugees' against such dominant discourses (see Smith and Waite 2019).

As my relationship with participants evolved over time so did their stories. Initial stories about their journeys and experiences of seeking asylum were then enriched by more personal insights into their aspirations, hopes and fears about how their life had changed. This allowed a deeper understanding of how their stories of seeking asylum not only respond to the expectations of the 'good refugee' narrative as instructed by the current 'hostile climate', but more importantly reveal the extent to which being identified as an asylum seeker in the North East of England informed their self-identification, their sense of belonging and ultimately, the kind of stories they felt safe enough to share. Here I will present my findings and reflections from analysing participants' stories (visual, oral and textual).

### *7.2.1 Stories of Lives Left Behind, Waiting and 'Be-longing'*

In storying their life events of seeking asylum in the UK, individuals chose to employ a linear narrative structure that would allow them to first explain the reasons *why* they were *forced* to leave their home countries. As shown in *Chapter 4*, participants' stories communicated the various reasons for which they were forced to leave their home countries including political or religious persecution, gender-based violence, living in warzones, escaping

domestic violence, trafficking and fear of death penalty due to one's sexuality. For some participants - especially those escaping gender-based violence, leaving was understood as a 'one way' journey without the promise of return; whereas for others, the notion of home remained a future possibility.

All participants started recounting their 'journeys' to the UK by first explaining the reasons they were seeking humanitarian protection for. Participants' internalised 'urgency' to provide a justification for one's reason to seek asylum can be understood as a response to the problematisation of 'choice' by popular media narrative tropes and legal contexts, as the notion of the 'authentic refugee' presupposes a lack of choice and therefore places asylum seekers in the position of a 'vulnerable victim.' In political discourses, the emphasis on external, macro-factors such as 'forced' displacement and 'processes of statecraft' (Soguk 1999) in shaping asylum seeker/refugee lives, denies the idea that individuals seeking asylum might have had some control in the process of becoming a refugee (Hebing 2009: 281).

Dismissing individuals' ability to make choices over their future, however limited, is problematic on different levels (Hebing 2009). First, it perpetuates notions of asylum seekers as 'passive victims' who can only rely on governments and non-governmental organisations, and who become a burden on the international community and their country of asylum (Turton 2003; Ghorashi 2005: 185). Secondly, thinking of asylum seekers in such a way, overlooks individual abilities and successes in remaking their own lives and securing a better future for themselves and their families (Soguk 1999; Hebing 2008: 182). Thirdly, relying on simplistic and generalized conceptions of asylum seekers, contributes to a narrow conception of 'refugeehood' which limits our understanding of their complex livelihoods.

As shown through my analysis, participants had some 'choice' in organising their trips, whereas their 'forced choices' were co-constructed by their individual backgrounds, their capacities, their identities as well as their gender, physical status and aspirations. Access to social, financial and cultural capital was pivotal in securing access to resources that enabled them to complete their journeys successfully as some participants relied on their families' connections and financial resources, while others had limited options and had to trust smugglers.

The difference in participants' journey experiences due to their intersectional identities and the degree of difficulty is captured by Youssef's comment when reflecting on his journey experience: 'In comparison to others my journey wasn't that dangerous. Others had to walk across countries, sleep in camps for weeks, months. Mine was much easier.' Youssef's comment introduces the problematization of choice and the urgent need to highlight one's powerlessness as prerequisite for credibility. Youssef's reflections on whether his journey was dangerous 'enough' also reveals the internalised understanding of participants that their asylum claims are being evaluated in accordance to criteria of need.

The relationship between legal storytelling, victimhood and credibility was further highlighted in this thesis through participants' reflection on having to tell their stories in a particular way as part of a successful asylum claim. As shown in *Chapter Five*, individuals seeking asylum rely on their capacities to communicate their story in a coherent and intelligible way that establishes a causal relationship between their experiences of persecution and their need for protection. During their interviews, participants' legal claims were dissected and cross-examined by immigration officers in accordance to country profile guidelines and expert testimonials.

Iqbal's (2016) notion of 'stories as passports' has supported my understanding of the materiality and centrality of stories within the asylum system and the different functions they may serve. Such an idea of 'stories as passports' requires critical reflection as not all stories can overcome all obstacles as part of the asylum process, instead only certain stories can serve as passports in so far as they align with particular political, social and narrative expectations (Iqbal 2016: 160). In my work, such a notion operates on two levels: first, stories as passports due to their 'recognisability' vis-à-vis the Refugee Convention and secondly, stories of origin (i.e. nationality) as passports due to their verified need and strong(er) claim to sanctuary.

I'll start with the notion of 'recognisability' as brought into focus by the story of Caleb, whose experience also offers interesting reflections on the precarious nature of stories as received, recognised and accepted within the asylum process. As shown in *Chapter 5* (p. 177-178), his body became scrutinized and challenged as it did not 'support' his claim by not being 'homosexual enough'. In Caleb's case, the notion of 'evidence' became further problematized

by the lines between visibility/invisibility and private/public supporting his seven-year-long mis-recognition by immigration officers as an 'authentic' victim of persecution due to his sexual orientation. In comparison to other participants, Caleb's control over the materiality of his story was further constrained by his inability to prove that he looked a particular way. The materiality of his story extended to his body, as it became subject to judgements beyond his control. Ultimately, the need to embody and perform a particular sexual identity reinforces the need of presenting one's image in accordance with accepted assumptions and constructions, as a prerequisite to be recognised as a genuine 'refugee'.

Secondly, the idea of stories as passports within the context of nationality is of relevance in understanding how participants stories emerge and respond to dominant narratives that create hierarchies of credibility as determined by their nationality, reason for fleeing and the conditions of one's journey. Such an example can be found in the case of most Syrian participants as they had an 'advantage' in contrast to other individuals who had fled countries that were recognised as 'safe'. For Syrian nationals, their identities as Syrian served as narrative currency that further strengthened their claim to asylum due to their deserving nature as 'genuine victims' of conflict instead of 'economic migrants'. Such a differentiation between the attributes of a 'good' or 'genuine' refugee was also embraced by research participants as shown by their reflections on the hypervisibility of Syrian refugees in the media as well as my personal experience of individuals' attempts to falsely claim or present false documents in support of their alleged Syrian origin.

Both examples are representative of how individuals seeking asylum presented their claims in a culture of disbelief that separates between 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers. Such a culture supports the function of the asylum procedure as an objectifying structural process (Hebing 2009: 209) that determines which stories and voices are credible and which aren't. Within this context, personal asylum stories can only be heard as long as individuals adopt a particular narrative form or provided that their stories become validated by 'louder', expert voices.

Whilst academic work has provided insights on the storied politics of asylum processes and the role of legal storytelling (Eastmond 2007; Sigona 2014), more discussion is needed on how asylum seekers and refugees themselves negotiate the landscape of storied politics and their personal agency in interpreting and reproducing meaning as part of their stories (see

also Hebing 2009). My research has sought to address such a gap by inviting participants to reflect and re-interpret their experiences of being interviewed and to reflect on the centrality of their narrative testimonies as part of their asylum claims. This is where a symbolic interactionist approach has supported my understanding of *how* individuals understand and respond to the symbol of 'asylum seeker/refugee' and the legal and narrative expectations attached to such a notion in order for one to be recognised as such.

Despite the constraining nature of a dominant narrative on 'refugeehood', participants exemplified control and remained pro-active in relation to the way they chose to present themselves across different contexts. An example of participants reproducing the embodied and performative nature of the identity of the asylum seeker can be found in Lina's narrated account of her meetings with her case worker where she describes how each time she felt the needed to present herself in a particular way that matched the 'image' an asylum seeker which meant she was not 'allowed' to have a smartphone or wear new clothes and make up (*Chapter 5*, p. 165). As she explained, her case worker would check the label of her coat and ask where she had found her 'new' second-hand clothes or make comments on her 'looking good' which Lina interpreted as not 'looking depressed enough' and as she explained would make her feel nervous about whether her case worker understood how difficult her situation was.

During an interview with another participant, I was asked to pause my voice recorder as he wanted to share a story of a violent incident that had taken place in a different country before arriving to the UK. I decided to not share the incident, as per his request, but would like to reflect on their reasons behind such a request. As he explained he was afraid of the damaging impact of sharing a 'negative' story as he did not want others to find out as they would not understand the situation and think he is 'bad or dangerous person' (Fieldnote Entry).

Both incidents underline the mediated and gendered nature of dominant 'refugeehood' discourses and the demarcation between 'good' and 'bad' refugees through particular traits. In particular, Lina's case highlights the perpetuated conception of the 'ideal' 'good' refugee (i.e. women and children) who is expected to be passive, poor, vulnerable and desperate. The second story, captures the constructed figure of the 'bad' refugee who is predominantly male, active, physically threatening and has financial stability (i.e. smartphones).

More importantly, both examples of performing 'refugeehood' highlight participants' practice of self-regulation as far as they were aware of the difference between a 'safe' and an 'unsafe' answer and the need to behave *like* an asylum seeker based on how they believe others perceived them (i.e. appearance, clothing, emphasis on need etc.). Although one could argue that by doing so they are 'succumbing' to favourable and 'safe' representations of 'refugeehood', I understand their devising of such strategies as an exercise of their agency as they employ their skills and resources in order to devise helpful strategies to cope with their current situation (see also Williams 2006). In her work with asylum seekers, Williams (2006), explains this form of agency as the 'tactics used by this marginal group to make the best of their resources and capabilities'. Similarly, my participants realised the need to devise tactics in order to respond to the structural and sociocultural constraints of asylum seeking.

As my work has demonstrated, the internalised understanding of how a 'refugee' should talk or look escapes the legal context and also affects the way individuals would reveal themselves to others in everyday life and especially, in front of audiences that they did not feel safe. For example, participants shared stories of dressing in 'expensive-looking' clothes in order to avoid being targeted or adopting behaviours and traits would allow them to feel safe and remain invisible (i.e. not identified as an 'asylum seeker/refugee'). The process of being *seen* as an 'asylum seeker/refugee' operates on two levels: first, as a self-directed process of impressions management and secondly, as an imposed external recognition and classification by others (media, immigration officers, others asylum seekers, host communities etc.). In a similar way, belonging also operates in two ways as individuals negotiated and explore their new identities while also being defined by others. More importantly, by being included in the group of 'asylum seekers/refugees', individuals experienced a change in their statuses as they became excluded by other forms of membership– most importantly that of citizenship.

The concept of belonging has been particularly relevant in examining experiences of displacement as the word itself,

captures the potential schism of 'being' from 'longing' – of physical location in a set of socio-political coordinates that may not correspond to one's own

experience and imagined place – as well as the felt (or compelled) need to bridge that gap. (Hartnell 2006: 335).

Hartnell's observation perfectly encapsulates the experiences of this study's participants, who described different experiences of belonging and non-belonging as being an integral element of their experiences in relation to accessing civic and legal rights, accessing particular social and cultural spaces (local community) as well as different levels of membership across different phases of civic life (education, job market).

Participants geographical positioning was an important parameter affecting their sense of belonging and in particular their sense of mobility. For some, living in a small town meant that local amenities, events, and refugee support services were in walking distance and therefore transportation costs did not limit their participation. On the other hand, living in a relatively small geographical location meant higher visibility and recognisability by the host community and in extension more vulnerability to racist remarks, as well as limited range of activities and accessible locations. A shared experience across all core participants was that of being resettled in areas far from previous social connections or family members which for some resulted in their active networking and joining new groups with a shared national origin in order to combat their isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Although the majority of participants had limited knowledge of the legal and welfare system in the UK prior to arrival, they all had expectations regarding humanitarian protection and expected their cases to be treated with respect, sensitivity and urgency. In contrast, most participants experienced prolonged periods of waiting during which their well-being deteriorated as they felt they were losing control over their lives and their sense of safety. Many participants described how the Home Office served as monitoring mechanism that tracked their movement - both physical in terms of staying within their assigned geographical locations but also civically, as they explained they were afraid to contact Home Office staff and were advised by their solicitors and case workers to be patient as to not 'flag up their case' or 'make them angry' (Participants' comments). For others, waiting *quietly* was not an option as shown by some participants' examples of accessing alternative legal advice and/or collaborating with their case workers.

All participants' resettlement journeys were defined by stigmatisation (in varying degrees) in relation to being othered due to their classification as asylum seekers. The seemingly 'innocent' question 'Where are you from' was charged with problematic connotations over one's right to be 'here'. The materiality of participants' ID cards became crucial in shaping interrelationships and interaction with others, as well as instructed a particular way of understanding an imagined 'refugeehood' (Szczepanik 2016: 23) during such a phase of waiting as internalised and reproduced by participants themselves.

My research has offered me a nuanced understanding of belonging in relation to its fluidity and its multilayered nature. Such a notion of fluidity was evidenced through the experiences of some female participants who regained their status as women in the UK as they were fleeing due to sexual violence, trafficking, and domestic abuse but who lost their right to citizenship by becoming asylum-seekers. Moreover, as my research has outlined, the interplay between belonging and non-belonging can also emerge within the 'same' group as demonstrated by some participants' choice to differentiate themselves as 'good refugees' who are actively trying to become integrated in their communities, as opposed to those who remain isolated and inactive. By internalizing the discursive practices of the 'good/bad refugees', participants themselves reproduced such boundaries in an attempt to distance themselves from stigmatised identities of the 'ungrateful' and 'bad refugee'.

Through participants' stories, I learned a lot about their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK and the ways in which individuals interpret, review and narrate such experiences. In engaging with different storytelling acts, mediums, audiences and platforms, I had the privilege to understand how complex storytelling acts can be and the different roles stories may hold in participants' lives. Combining biographical and arts-based participatory research with symbolic interactionism allowed me to further develop the concept of ethno-mimesis (as originally introduced by O'Neill 1999; 2002) and to develop my own ethno-mimetic approach that focused on individuals' social and storytelling interactions with other social actors through storytelling (visual and narrative).

This research is the first of its kind to use ethno-mimesis while conducting arts-based and biographical participatory research with individuals seeking asylum in the UK, underpinned by symbolic interactionism. Such a fusion of different conceptual/methodological frameworks has helped me understand how individuals respond and share stories with one another and how

such stories serve particular purposes while also responding to different audiences and expectations. Such an ethno-mimetic approach has allowed me to move across disciplines, experiment with different methodologies and provide several opportunities for storytelling, creative reinterpretation and personal expression. Inviting individuals to (re)present their stories creatively was a central methodological aim of this work. In particular, it moved beyond imitating or documenting life and instead became an act of storytelling through supporting narrative production that supports self-representation as well as possibilities for imagining something new. This following section will explore in more detail lessons learned from working with stories and employing an ethno-mimetic approach in order to explore experiences of forced displacement.

### **7.3 Learning from Stories | Reflections on Analysis & Methodology: Practical & Ethical Considerations**

Through their stories, individuals reveal a particular image of themselves and respond to narrative and symbolic cues, through one might describe as story-management. The stories that individuals chose to reveal about themselves reflect their processes of self-identification, how they see themselves, and more importantly in this case, how they want to be seen by others (Cole and Knowles 2001: 119). As individuals, we adopt both roles that of the storyteller as someone who tells a story, as well as the character about whom stories are told. According to Benjamin (1992: 87), 'the storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to this tale.' Benjamin's description of storytelling suggests that the storyteller is embodied before an audience simultaneously as 'both a narrator and a character, both a speaking subject and a subject of discourse' (Langellier and Peterson 2004: 9). Storytelling is therefore embodied by participants in a system of relations among audiences, storytellers, narrators, characters, stories and symbols.

As shown through my research, the role of the audience is central in determining *what* kind of stories individuals could share and *how* those are told. For example, many stories that were critical of the asylum determination system or the wider integration experience, would have remained silent with the legal context or in front of host community members due to the fear of seeming 'ungrateful.' Most of these stories occurred after months of establishing relationships with participants and in 'unconventional' interview contexts – for example during our 'coffee meetings' at coffee shops (see *Chapter 3*, p. 88-89).

Participants' stories have many roles and purposes. In my research I have identified three main purposes: First, individuals employ storytelling to present themselves in such a way that responds to sociocultural/legal/political expectations and can increase their chances of achieving refugee status through recognition. Such a presentation also allows them to counter negative assumptions and respond to the 'why are you here?' question. Secondly, stories allow individuals to review their lives and exilic experiences in such a way that offers a sense of purpose, personal growth and empowerment. Through such a retelling, individuals focused on the triumph of overcoming hardship, loss and tragedy, and their efforts to re-build a new safe and successful life. Their experience of loss became one of new beginnings, and an opportunity to 'set an example' for others. This was particularly common amongst individuals who redirected their energy and negative experiences into volunteering, helping other individuals and participating in community and research projects. Finally, individuals employ their stories as tools to raise awareness, educate others, counteract negative prejudice and inspire change—personal and social. Many participants expressed their hope that my research would produce new knowledge about their living conditions, their histories and that it would offer a different perspective of what it means to be a 'refugee/asylum seeker' that moves beyond the victim/threat dichotomy.

Through my research I have embraced Haaken and O'Neill's (2014: 83) commitment to 'open up' the storytelling space for a wide range of accounts that depart from 'officially authorized scripts' for suffering. Although my research did allow for a range of personal accounts it is important to note the limitations of its primary audience; myself as *the* researcher. In initiating such a research encounter with participants, I was already (to an extent) predetermining my study's nature of stories (i.e. seeking asylum). I also found that my gender and my age impacted on participants' story-sharing choices. It is important to note that despite my awareness of not searching for a 'good story' (i.e. counter-narratives) in certain cases my role as a researcher (emphasis on identifying key issues and raising awareness) and as a volunteer, might have 'inspired' the production of certain stories as acts of resistance and/or stories of success that perhaps challenge dominant discourses about asylum seekers/refugees. In other cases—especially when engaging with male participants, my positionality as a female researcher might have influenced the extent to which they felt comfortable describing difficult or emotionally traumatic experiences in an attempt to present themselves as 'strong'.

In my research I have identified the central role of expectations and discursive understandings of ‘asylum seekers’ as obstacles to receiving different stories and re-producing the same kind of stories by both individuals experiencing forced displacement as well as others. Such a focus on ‘vulnerability’, ‘deservingness’, ‘authenticity’, ‘threat’ or ‘extreme talent’ can result in the construction of a narrative ‘echo chamber’<sup>9</sup>- understood as a closed system as well as a wider social epistemic structure from which ‘relevant’ voices (i.e. asylum seekers) have been actively discredited or excluded (Nguyen 2018). Such a closed system not only restricts what kind of stories can be heard but also influences the ways in which individuals monitor their storytelling practices in front of different audiences in order to match their expectations.

Understanding the role of expectations and internalised meanings allows us to better understand the ways in which individuals narrate their lives. Another important reflection on storytelling is the difference between what Bruner (1984) explains as *life as lived* (what actually happened) and *life as told* (narrated life experiences). As Bruner (1984: 7) notes, ‘A life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context’. Through my research I primarily had access to *lives as told* by participants which allowed me to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and how they relate and contextualise them within their wider surrounding social settings.

An example of the way of how individuals storify their experiences can be seen in participants’ celebratory posts on social media announcing their successful arrival despite their negative experiences of being detained or imprisoned upon entry to the UK (see *Chapter 4*, p.150-155). Their posts functioned as ‘success stories’ announcing their safe arrival to the UK while addressing both transnational and local audiences. Through their visual and textual stories, participants engaged in self-representation, as they revealed particular images of themselves and their lives which perhaps do not necessarily mirror a single, ‘objective’ reality. During my analysis, I was careful not to distinguish between online and ‘offline’ stories. Instead of treating them as a different kind of stories, I understood participants’ social media updates as an extension of their daily interactions (Roberts 2015: 14) and an additional facet of their everyday self-representational practices.

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<sup>9</sup> In news media, the term ‘echo chamber’ is used to describe a situation in which beliefs and opinions are amplified by continuous communication inside a ‘closed’ system (Flaxman et al 2016). I’m critically applying such a term to underline the constructed and ‘closed’ narrative space in which such stories occur and become reproduced while also excluding and discrediting relevant voices (Nguyen 2018).

Engaging in 'netnography' was an important milestone in my methodological journey and a necessary one, due to the centrality of such platforms in most participants' lives. By interrogating participants' 'digital stories' I was able to understand the differences between lived and storied experiences of asylum and more importantly to understand how individuals constructed particular subjectivities and narratives about themselves. As Plummer observes (2002: 99), new technologies offer new insights into personal daily experiences: 'you can access a life story and then find sounds, film clips, images and archives that are linked to the life. The life is not fixed, but one assembled through the reader.' Plummer's remark highlights the exciting possibilities of biographical research in the digital age, as well warns of its analytical challenges in blurring relations between researcher, participants and audience (Roberts 2015: 17).

Early in the design of my methodological toolkit, one of the steering group members explained how it was 'important for this project not to make people feel like lab rats. We are people who happen to become refugees and are happy to talk about it, but do not want to be constantly reminded about it.' In following Pink's (2001) recommendation of reflexivity as a prerequisite for ethical participatory research, I was particularly concerned about the ethical implications of asking my participants to describe their experiences of being an asylum seeker and therefore positioning them into the same narrative responsibility of having to explain *why* they are here. I was equally aware of the impact of mining 'stolen stories' (Pittaway et al. 2010: 236) in relation to how participants might be left feeling exposed or used for their stories.

A key aim of this investigation was to invite individuals to share their stories that can move beyond serving as 'proof.' Nevertheless, it soon became clear that I was positioning my participants in a particular space where they were once again asked to provide testimonies in order to meet the criteria of a particular participatory-focused academic environment, granting me the role of an intermediary as *I* was producing a story about *their* stories. Introducing a creative methodological parameter, contributed towards my attempt to avoid 'mirroring the asylum context' (Iqbal 2016: 196) and its corresponding narrative hierarchies. Despite my conscious efforts to safeguard participants' wellbeing and to not reactivate painful memories my research process did include moments of emotional tension as I could see some of my participants trying to hold back their tears or their voices trembling as they recounted their stories.

In adopting an ethno-mimetic approach, I sought to invite participants to review their stories and life experiences through a creative lens. My study's methodology established a 'safe' storytelling space which invited participants to escape, reflect, explore and creatively reinterpret their everyday experiences without any threat of judgement or penalty. The produced ethno-mimetic images occurred as individuals reimagined their narrated experiences in visual form, thereby employing images as sites for meaning making, self-representation, and social critique (see also Stavropoulou 2019: 111). Working with images opened up additional opportunities for storytelling. The images themselves served as story cues that invited further reflection, storytelling and dialogue. For some drawing and photography allowed them to put into words what could not be uttered or provided a new way of interpreting a situation. Similar to participants' stories, images do not serve as the '*real person*' but as a presentation and interpretation open to alternative 'readings' (Roberts 2015: 16-17; Roberts 2011). Equally, participant-produced/sourced images should be understood as purposeful, multi-layered visual stories, combined with embodied, affective and symbolic experiences.

As addressed in my *Methodology*, working with images offers a diverse range of possibilities for self-expression, reflection and analysis. It is important however, to remain aware of the wider issues implicated for biographical text/image analysis not only relating to participants' interpretation and aesthetics, but also to issues of subjectivity in relation to broader political and sociocultural values (Roberts 2015: 17). A picture is thus 'an incomplete picture' (Chappell et al 2011: 71) – both within the research process as well as individual practices of image production and sharing – as far as it represents a particular moment in time and cannot adequately 'capture the plethora of behaviours, communication forms and social interactions that take place.' (Lenette 2019: 160).

In comparison to the use of photography for purely 'illustrative' purposes, the project fostered a participatory process that returned the camera to the usual 'object' of documentation and invited participants to reflect and construct images that were important to them. According to Azadeh, art can serve as a powerful vehicle for socially-engaged action by communicating powerful messages, while remaining subtle enough in order not to offend but instead invite audiences to engage with the core issue. In her own words:

I think because everyone is creative in themselves. Every human being is creative. They may not touch those senses, but they are all creative and it is a very gentle, subtle, humane way of passing your thoughts. It doesn't have to be 'in your face' to say what you think is wrong, the ways of saying it that gives the message and yeah with that in a very sensitive way. **(Reflections on process)**

Azadeh also addressed the role of art and in particular its capacity for visual storytelling in relation to challenging assumptions and creating empathetic responses from different audiences:

So, you tell a story about different people's lives with art and also about representing what's going on in that society. You know for example migration. So, it records all that and also educates people and lets people know. It raises awareness, education by showing that there is another way of how things can be (...) Because when it tells the stories of people or their feelings, like what you do, asylum seekers say for example sitting around a table and expressing their feeling through art, that says a lot. That tell their stories to other so they can see what is happening so it is very powerful. It is a fighting tool. **(Reflections on process)**

Through the process of ethno-mimesis, participants were able to move beyond being only a research participant and instead to recognize themselves as co-producers of knowledge. In contrast to solely interview environments, participants had the time and creative invitation to revisit, develop and re-present their narrated accounts through art. In doing so, they were able to reinterpret lived experiences while also engaging with tacit, sensory and symbolic forms of knowledge (Stavropoulou 2019: 111). This allowed them to produced purposeful knowledge (praxis) and invest in their storytelling and creative skills. Participants therefore moved beyond 'taking' a photo to instead 'making' one, as their visual responses supported personal reflections, meaning-making and social critiques (Stavropoulou 2019). Ultimately, participation and more importantly a sense of belonging occurred on three levels: (1) being involved in knowledge-production and being recognised and validated as experts of their owns experiences; (2) engaging in self-representation; and finally, (3) sharing stories that

communicate, challenge and reimagine what it feels like to be an asylum seeker (Stavropoulou 2019: 112).

Nevertheless, despite evidence of the transformative potential of art, it is important not to assume that participatory research methods can inherently eliminate power hierarchies or completely democratise ownership of data between researcher and participants (see Banks and Brydon-Miller 2018; Stavropoulou 2019: 112). Despite the self-directed creative production of participants in producing personal visual stories, the final curatorial responsibility led with me. My positionality, sense of aesthetics and analytical role as a researcher was still central in collecting, organising, categorising and determining which images to include as part of my research's dissemination (i.e. publications, exhibitions, conference presentations). When engaged in participatory research it is therefore important to work towards ensuring that decision-making processes during research collaborations remain reflexive, transparent and clearly communicated (Banks et al 2013; Bachelet and Jeffery 2019).

As my research progressed, I became aware of the need to remain flexible and be creative in relation to coming up with solutions regarding the creative sessions' structure and schedule (i.e. combining both individual and collective sessions; hosting women-only workshop as per request; adapting methods to incorporate participants' skills) as my principal concern had to be participants' well-being and comfort. Working with such a diverse group required additional preparation, adaptation and increased attention to ensuring that everyone was involved at an equal level. The latter was difficult to maintain throughout all sessions as different individuals expressed greater interest, whereas others were more vocal about their opinions or tried to direct the conversation. It was therefore important to maintain a balance between promoting a participatory and collective ethos that would support dialogue and story-sharing without denying individual responses and experiences.

There were many important lessons learned during my research journey. Two of the most important ones relate to my research project's participatory nature. I came to understand participation as a complex, dialogical and iterative process (Wallerstein and Duran 2003) which evolves, grows and/or diminishes based on each individual research study (Powers et al 2006: 129). Secondly, participatory research is not defined by the methods and techniques employed, but the actual degree of *involvement* of participants. In my research experience, participation occurred as an iterative, often challenging process that required a renegotiation of priorities

and efficient management of obstacles to participation such as participants' availability, PhD submission timeline and aspirations for meaningful collaboration. On the other hand, expectations around participation should not limit attempts for, even, partial participation. As discussed in my methodology, my creative study's steering group (see pp. 81-83) may have not functioned as initially envisaged but it did evolve into a collective of advisors who contributed their insights and ideas at different stages of the research process, thereby transforming my research journey.

Another methodological challenge occurred as my study's visual methods (photography and drawing) were not necessarily embraced by all participants as for some the lack of existing creative/artistic skills and/or concerns around privacy and risk served as initial barriers. Similar to Guruge et al.'s (2015) work with young refugees, I found that participants had to be reminded that there is no expectation over one's creative skills and that equally there are no 'bad' or 'good' images. Such concerns were explored through different conversations and redesign sessions were individuals and myself would come up with alternative ideas for creative activities or decide to focus primarily on interviews. Pre-planning was an essential part of the participatory creative sessions as some individuals were involved in discussions around dissemination, final output and future uses. Moreover, initial planning and informed overview of artistic outputs were crucial in determining participation as participants who were involved in the setting up of the workshops were also the ones who supported publicity, dissemination and co-analysis (see also Woodgate et al 2016). The two photographic exhibitions that occurred during Refugee Week 2017 (Discovery Museum, see p. 76-78) and 2018 (ARC Stockton, see p. 94-95) served as important means of research dissemination in terms of engaging new audiences (local communities) as well as further elevated the value of participant-produced knowledge as important and 'worthy' of being exhibited and celebrated. As discussed with one participant, 'museums are spaces of knowledge and history. They are also spaces in which individuals come together and celebrate important lives and stories' (Fieldwork notes, personal reflection). The opportunity to have their self-portraits and visual stories exhibited publicly, offered some participants a sense of validation and further amplified their recognition as experts of their own lives. As one participant explained, 'it is important for people to understand our experiences and only we can tell our stories.' For the involved partnering venues and projects, the exhibitions offered the opportunity to further support their service users and to showcase their engagement and outreach work with such community groups, as well as their commitment to raising awareness of such important social issues. As one project

member explained, 'It is important to provide such opportunities that can support [the group's] development of new skills and that helps them communicate with different members of our community.'

From the outset of the project and throughout its delivery and evaluation, it was important for myself as a researcher to try to minimise the impact of my personal participatory agenda (Smith et al 2017) and to prevent my research process being shaped by my expectations regarding my methodology/or my study's outcomes (i.e. empowering participants, informing public opinion). The participatory nature of my ethnography contributed significantly in terms of my understanding of how individuals chose to document their lives and express themselves through mobile photography and/or social media, serving also as sources of data. Understanding how people engaged in cultural processes of visual production enriched my arts-based approach as their existing skills and narrative capacities became part of our creative collaboration and ensured that each person participated as much or as little as they felt comfortable. Some participants used their mobile phones to introduce new images as part of our research relationship, whereas others shared existing images from their mobile phone's photo gallery as well as their personal social media channels and online images.

As a researcher engaged in biographical research I am committed to examining '*lives on the move*' -understood as individual experiences considered within the 'flow' of everyday experiences (Roberts 2015: 15 original emphasis) and as such I decided it was important to examine participants' stories across various spaces: verbal, textual, visual and digital. Such a notion of movement and evolvment was crucial in my understanding of how stories change, evolve and become 'translated' across different platforms. This is also where ethno-mimesis and the hyphen between 'ethno' and 'mimesis' became crucial in understanding how my research initiated such an 'in between space' (O'Neill 2012), which invited participants to re-interpret, re-imagine and re-represent their narrated life experiences through their creative stories.

## **7.4 Final Thoughts**

This investigation has drawn upon the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and visual culture in order to explore the role of stories and arts-based research methods in the lives of individuals

seeking asylum in the North East of England. This is a thesis about stories and self-representation. Stories are an important resource for forcibly displaced individuals, as the process of seeking asylum relies heavily on providing 'credible' narrative testimonials. Equally, stories serve as valuable resources for self-representation, as individuals negotiate particular ways of being seen through the stories they share.

In combining biographical and arts-based research methods, this research initiated an ethno-mimetic space that invited participants to challenge, re-imagine and creatively reflect on what it feels like to be an asylum seeker through creative means. Art can serve many functions; it can facilitate social connections and promote interaction, as well as support self-expression and raise awareness (Stavropoulou 2019). Equally, it can become political, as participants may employ artwork as a 'fighting tool' in order to accomplish social critique on issues that matter to them.

Stories do not occur in isolation; they emerge within and become part of what Benhabib (1992: 198) defines as a 'web of narratives', in which individuals develop their sense of being as well as draw from these 'worlds of discourse which regulates lives' in order to enrich their own stories (Plummer 1995: 144-145; Hebing 2009: 134). According to Sandberg (2016: 167), 'narratives rely on a shared repertoire of cultural stories to be understood' (Sandberg 2016, p. 167) and, in this way, no one is totally immune from the influence and effects of dominant narratives and their ways of seeing (Smith and Waite 2019: 2289).

At the core of this investigation lies the recognition that personal stories of forced displacement are in continuous competition with other dominant discourses and public narratives about refugees and asylum seekers as mediated, reproduced, and shared by others (Hebing 2009; Smith and Waite 2018: 2). Plummer's (1995) observation that 'storytelling flows in the stream of power' (1995: 28) is particularly useful in understanding how more powerful voices secure access to audiences that are willing to listen at the expense of others and are therefore in charge of determining which issues will be promoted on the public arena and how. Adichie's (2009: np) insight into the politics of the 'single story' in relation to stereotypical representations of Africa is explored in her TED Talk where she argues that 'Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person'. The idea of a 'single story' lends itself to asylum storytelling practices that highlight the need for a central 'asylum story' (Woolley 2017) that effectively communicates one's plea for protection and in doing so

may erode one's unique biography. It is therefore important to examine the conditions that enable or disable refugee stories as they emerge within a matrix of power relationships, in which social practices such as 'domination, hierarchy, marginalization and inequality' determine which voices are able to 'claim to dominate...and...possess the resources' (Plummer 1995: 28).

This research has emerged in the midst of Europe's mass displacement crisis (2015- 2017) and therefore sheds light on a current social climate that is shaped by dominant political and media narratives and supported by a policy infrastructure that determines *how* refugee narratives should be presented, received and recognised as credible. Participants' stories and experiences oscillate between hypervisibility and invisibility (Woolley 2010) in relation to the homogenising effect of an assumed 'refugee experience.' This study has highlighted the precarious and hostile framework in which such stories arise and respond to, as well as has demonstrated the enduring impact of immigration control on asylum seekers' lives in the North East of England (see Kostakopoulou 2010; Stewart and Mulvey 2014; Rotter 2016). In doing so it seeks to further highlight the need and transformative potential of combining biographical and participatory arts-based research methods as vehicles for 'social transformation and making the world a better place' (Pahl and Pool 2018: 2).

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## Appendix 1: INFORMATION SHEET FOR WORKSHOP PROGRAMME (a)

### My Story; My Voice:

*A participatory arts research project on the refugee experience*

A community-led arts project, engaging individuals who have experienced exile in a photographic documentation of their experiences of living in the UK with a particular focus on their experience of being a refugee in the North East of England. The project will be delivered by a facilitator/academic researcher.

This project is invested in the power of arts as a tool for social change where participants will be invited to participate in a series of arts workshops such as photography serving as means for self-expression and empowerment.

Using digital storytelling as tool to facilitate self-expression and representation this project will allow participants to produce a collection of personal visual stories combining photographs and narrative-interviews.

This is a project that will invite participants to tell their stories in their own words and images, therefore challenging media bias and stereotypes.

The theme of this project will revolve around the notion of representation allowing participants to reflect upon their experience of being a refugee in the UK.

### **Learning schedule:**

**Session 1:** Introduce project, research objectives, outcomes & dissemination as well as discussing structure of workshops and ethical consideration/consent release regulations. Additionally, allow time to make revisions/adjustments;

**Session 2:** Introduction to digital storytelling (brief overview of DST, aims and objectives, show examples of work and initiation of storytelling process; story-lab session;

**Session 3:** Story development and story circle – working as a team all members of the story-circle will be offered the chance to present their story idea and to receive feedback. They will then be encouraged to produce a narrative to be used as an audio track for their selected photographs hence constructing a coherent narrative;

**Session 4:** Finalising narrative and recording voice over (using audio recording equipment);

**Session 5:** Selecting material for digital stories (photographs taken by participants themselves as well as material under a creative commons licence)  
Introductory session to video editing using Adobe Premiere Pro;

**Session 6:** Video editing and technical support;

**Session 7:** Finalising stories and exporting files;

**Session 8:** Group screening of stories and reflection/feedback group session;



**Session 9:** Narrative interviews;

**Session 10:** Possible second interview & project aftercare session.

**Project objectives:**

- Initiate a dialogue around representation, the role of images and media bias;
- Improve mental and social well-being of participants through increased self-confidence and by offering sense of accomplishment, authorship and control;

**Acquire skills:**

- Photography, video editing, storytelling, audio recording, script-writing;
- Social skills (teamwork, dialogue, collaboration, presentation);
- Time management, planning and designing individual project;

**Project outcomes:**

- A collection of digital stories/profiles from all participants to be showcased via project website
- Documentation section including photographs from the workshop sessions
- A project evaluation report (findings/objectives/methodology/case studies/evidence)
- Public screening of stories and celebration event, both at host organisations & Durham University (TBC)

## Appendix 2: INFORMATION SHEET FOR WORKSHOP PROGRAMME (b)

### **Option A: Photovoice Workshop**

Participants will be invited to photography masterclass sessions involving camera master-classes and photo- shoot sessions. The workshop will include nine sessions:

**Session 1:** Project introduction and brainstorming session allowing the group to familiarise themselves with the concept and the proposed methodology and equally to make revisions/adjustments;

**Session 2:** Establishing the key research question and social action plan (e.g. exhibition)-driven by participants; allowing them to become invested in project and claim ownership;

**Session 3:** Photography masterclass including training and practice (one or two sessions depending on participants' skills);

**Session 4:** Shooting Day(s);

**Session 5:** Discussion in between shooting days and feedback session;

**Session 6:** Exhibition of photographs;

**Session 7:** Debriefing;

**Session 8:** Individual narrative interviews;

**Session 9:** Second individual narrative interviews and aftercare/reflection session.

### **Option B: Photographic Portraits**

An alternative approach to participatory photography (depending on whether participants like the idea) would involve the production of photographic portraits as a means of self-representation. The workshop will include seven sessions:

**Session 1:** Project introduction and development of methodology (defining aims and objectives, final output/dissemination);

**Session 2:** Camera training & positioning (frame/angle);

**Session 3:** Practice & development of portrait ideas;

**Session 4:** Production: Photographic Portraits;

**Session 5:** Digital printing of photographs and photo-elicitation with group discussion context;

**Session 6:** Narrative interviews;

**Session 7:** Second narrative interview & aftercare/reflection session.

## Appendix 3. INFORMATION SHEET FOR POTENTIAL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Dear XX,

I hope you are really well. Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Nelli Stavropoulou and I am the director of [Bridge + Tunnel Voices](#), a media charity in Newcastle employing film and digital media as a tool to challenge exclusion, segregation and to promote self-expression for diverse community groups, at risk young people, and socially excluded individuals. I am also a postgraduate researcher at Durham University working on participatory-based research and examining visual methodologies, as a tool for self-expression for young refugees and asylum seekers.

For the next five months I will be volunteering at your organisation, spending time in the centre and delivering an arts-project with you. I would like to invite you to take part in my social arts project exploring visual arts practices such as tools for challenging stereotypical media representations of refugees and asylum seekers.

I am trying to use the power of arts as a tool for social change by carrying out a series of workshops where participants will be given the opportunity to participate in a series of arts workshops such as digital storytelling or photography serving as means for self-expression and empowerment.

The project is also complemented by two interviews exploring experience of living in the UK and individual responses to media representations of refugees and how this project may be useful in challenging such stereotypes.

The purpose of these interviews and workshops is to invite people to reflect on the questions that arise through such arts practices and how these issues are negotiated.

The workshop programme includes a minimum of 10- 12 workshop sessions and two interviewing sessions. As part of the workshops I will be documenting the procedure (video and photography) if you do not wish to be filmed or photographed please let me know. Equally the interviews will be recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of my research. You have the option of remaining anonymous or having your name attached to your comments.

This is a chance for you to tell your version of the story through a visually engaging and powerful way. We can discuss together how you may want to approach this retelling – for example you may want to use abstract images for your story or take a cropped picture of your face for your photographic portrait; equally you may want to tell the story in the third person, use different camera angles or ask me to tell the story for you. This section will be filmed, edited and presented publicly so it is also important we discuss why you want to go public with this particular story. You will be in charge of the editing as this is your story to tell. We will discuss how you would like to be credited or whether you would prefer to remain anonymous.

The research proposal is currently being revised by the Ethics Committee at the Department of Sociology, Durham University. This is to ensure that the proposed study is ethically responsible.

Before participating you will be asked to complete a consent release form with a multiple-choice option. Your participation is voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any point

I hope my work will be of interest and use to you. I will be happy to share with you any parts of my research and welcome any feedback and suggestions.

Thank you in advance for your time in reading my proposal and I look forward to hearing from you and I hope I will have the chance to meet you, hear your stories and learn from you while creating a unique piece of art.

With kind regards,

Nelli Stavropoulou

## Appendix 4. INTRODUCTORY EMAIL FOR PARTNER ORGANISATION

Dear XX,

I hope my email finds you well. Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Nelli Stavropoulou and I am the director of [Bridge + Tunnel Voices](#), a media charity in Newcastle employing film and digital media as a tool to challenge exclusion, segregation and to promote self-expression for diverse community groups, at risk young people, and socially excluded individuals. I am also a postgraduate researcher at Durham University working on participatory-based research and examining visual methodologies, as a tool for self-expression for young refugees and asylum seekers.

My research focuses on the potential of arts methods to empower individuals to challenge stereotypical media representations of themselves, and to offer them the chance to voice their stories. This would include a series of storytelling sessions, audio recording and photography workshops. The primary aim of this workshop schedule would be to facilitate self-expression and allow participants to become in charge of their own representations, while acquiring new creative and social skills. Prior to the workshop programme I would like the opportunity to spend time at your establishment to become familiar with the group, to spend time with them in order to get a better sense of their lives and personal stories.

I am aware of your work across the North East and the range of different services and opportunities you offer. I would be really interested in finding out more about your work and your current volunteering opportunities.

I am currently researching different organisations and community groups that could be potentially interested in taking part. Being involved in raising awareness and volunteering missions at Dunkirk I have witnessed the stigma around refugees and the extent of misrepresentation. Through this project I would like to tackle such assumptions and offer participants the tools and space to speak for themselves.

If you think this would be a project that some of your service users would enjoy, I would really appreciate your thoughts and would be very grateful for the opportunity to meet in person and discuss more.

I really look forward to hearing from you and thank you again for your time and help.

All best wishes,  
Nelli Stavropoulou

## Appendix 5. INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS



### **My Story; My Voice:**

*A participatory arts research project on the refugee experience*

**Project information:** A workshop programme engaging refugees and asylum seekers in a series of photographic workshops around their experiences of living in the North East, England. Participants will be invited to complete interviews at the end of the project.

### **What is this project about?**

We are conducting research to find out what the experiences of refugees living in the North East and how this experience looks like.

### **What would you be doing?**

We would like you to be part of a creative media workshop including arts methods, storytelling and photography. We would also like you to consider being interviewed about your experience of living in the UK.

### **What will happen to your information?**

We will not use names in the report unless we have your permission to do so. All information will be stored securely as per the data protection act and recordings and copies of interviews will be destroyed at the end of the project (March 2018).

### **What if you decide to opt out?**

You can change your mind about participating in this project at any time — either before, or during the workshops/interviews. Once the research report is written it will not be possible to withdraw.

### **Thank you for reading this information sheet!**

If you have any questions or concerns please contact [ Key Person] who is managing this project for [Gatekeeper Organisation]. Nelli from *Durham University* can be contacted by email at [nelly.stavropoulou@durham.ac.uk](mailto:nelly.stavropoulou@durham.ac.uk)

## Appendix 6. PARTICIPANT CONSENT RELEASE FORM



### **My Story; My Voice:**

*A participatory arts research project on the refugee experience*

### **Consent Form**

**If you would like to be interviewed as a stakeholder then we would like your written consent. Please read each sentence and tick the boxes if you agree. At the bottom of this sheet please sign and print your name.**

- I have read and understood the information leaflet and I would like to be interviewed
- I am happy to be interviewed about my experiences and stories of living in the North East of England
- I know that I can withdraw at any point up until the analysis and write up of the report.
- I understand that the images will be kept in an archive and will be exhibited as part of publications (journal articles), project presentations and a digital project output, a project-dedicated website hosting both images and short digital videos unless specified otherwise.
- I hereby grant Nelli Stavropoulou consent to use material resulting from the photography/digital storytelling workshop programme, and any reproductions or adaptations of the images for any purposes in relation to research dissemination and legacy around this project.

**Print Name**

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**Signed**

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**Date**

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# Visual Stories

Creative sessions: visual arts, collage & photography



A series of creative research workshops during which we will be making creative portraits of our selves through painting, collage and photography. Each session we will be working with a different theme: identity, image, and story.

This is a safe space where participants can share stories about themselves and find new ways to represent themselves and their experiences through arts-based methods.

This is a participatory group project – everyone's opinion matters and will be heard. We will also be discussing opportunities to present some of the produced artwork as part of *Refugee Week 2018*.

**Schedule:** Friday morning 10-12PM

**Venue:** (Removed due to privacy and participant safety issues)