

Dr. Raccagni Dalila
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italia
dalila.raccagni@unicatt.com

You who travel, you who watch me: the telling of my story

Narration as an instrument of self-study

Narration and migration

The topic of immigration – as it moves away from the dominant media, political and legislative discourse, which are largely characterized by an alarming logic and an objective representation of migrants – is impregnated by the symbolic role of the self-narrative¹. Narration clearly demonstrates to immigrants the need to deal with their own painful experience, so as to meet with society's need to welcome and frame these lives, but also with the desire, the good will, and the demand from third parties - such as journalists, researchers, and scholars – to return dignity to these otherwise anonymous and voiceless lives, so that migrants "become subject to their story [...] and are not only part of the blurred multitude we call "foreigners" ².

These life stories are testimonies of the lives lived and recounted by the same protagonists. They usually have a dual value. On one hand, "therapeutic" and soothing for the authors: the ability to recount their story allows them to identify the situation and at the same time make sense of it. On the other hand, there is the formative function for the self-recounting subject.

A narration of a migrant's life, in particular, is not just a sequence of events and experiences subjectively lived, but – by means of its plot and highlighting the various situations (sometimes in an agitated way) – permits a way of reading reality, producing a concrete way to experience values and meanings, standards of coexistence and social interaction. The narrator does not only recount the story; he who tell, he who narrate is able to interpret it, so that he can be able to identify new perspectives of meaning.

In this respect, autobiographical workshops – promoted by individual or community organisations – are constantly being promoted. They stimulate self-writing as an experience of self-re-identity and self-formation, connected to the personal or family's path, in the belief that the self-narrative prepares us to listen to each other in contexts where people have different historical cultural backgrounds. It therefore acts as a tool to promote not only self-awareness, but also intercultural education.

Memory is not passive, nor a snapshot of the past, but builds, rebuilds, selects, and transforms; in other words, it «opens the continuity of the future³». It is a kind of «diary, a piggy bank of the spirit⁴», where the most precious facts of human existence are preserved. In this sense, memory is not auxiliary to thought, but the «ability to preserve, remember and forget according to our senses⁵», which makes it a condition of humanity. Removing the memory means «destroying the basis of one's own identity and continuity in time⁶». Without memory, in fact, the subject is subtracted, living alone in the instant, having lost their conceptual and cognitive abilities. Their identity disappears.

In this sense, memory becomes "a necessary premise of identity, as people develop their identities and build a

¹ MENGOZZI C., (2013). *Narrazioni contese. Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione*, Rome, Carrocci, p. 115.

² OGNISANTI M., TRAVERSI T., (2008). *Letterature migranti e identità urbane. I centri interculturali e la promozione di spazi pubblici di espressione, narrazione e ricomposizione identitaria*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, p. 182.

³ GALIMBERTI U., (2009). *Parole nomadi*, Milan, Feltrinelli, p.108.

⁴ GRECO G., (2009). A proposito della memoria storica. *Bibliomanie.it*, n. 19.

⁵ VEGETTI FINZI S., (2006). Memoria e rimozione: il buon uso del ricordo. *Iride*, n. 49, p. 608.

⁶ GALIMBERTI U., (2009). *Parole nomadi*, Milan, Feltrinelli, p.107.

coherent self-sketch from the interpretation of their own memories and intentions.⁷».

Memories and identities, therefore, "fertilize mutually, merge and recast themselves to produce the trajectory of life⁸».

The emblem and the character of the individual, in light of their own identity, is also shown in the physiognomy of their face: something that I can photograph, illustrate, and remember, but that is at the same time something unshakeable, something that has a more elusive effect. The manifestation of the face⁹ becomes speech and its same epiphany¹⁰ becomes the most expressive form of the subject's autobiography. Thanks to the face the subject has the ability to recognize and be recognized, because it constitutes «the most defenseless part of us, the most exposed, the most revealing and even the most deterrent, so much that it's difficult to kill one by looking in his face»¹¹.

The face is the identification of an otherness that is close to the gaze, revealing itself in its proximity, without resolving itself in a given identity or a relationship of belonging. It resists being taken by its transcendence at any attempt to know it or to capture it in its own knowledge: that which reveals itself is transcendence itself, as intense as the universal and individual encounter¹². The face is in fact an expression of a peculiarity which escapes the attempts of categorization and generalisation and of a tension to universality that passes through diversity of possible faces¹³.

Some common elements emerge within the autobiographical narration of migrants. First and foremost, the family: the main structure for the formation of the individual, which provides the fundamental tools for successful integration into society, and recalls the key sense of belonging to one's country of origin. At the same time, there is the awareness of having embarked on a journey that represents – for the contemporary migrant – the escape from the boundaries of reality and its constructions, but also from the fear of tomorrow, of unjust war, of tribulations and violence under different forms in his present. It is for these conditions that he is prepared to face the perils, dangers and traumatic experiences that lead him away from his loved ones.

The power to narrate is therefore part of every human being that, through their tale, transcends the boundaries of their own reality and elaborates their experience. Narration is against death and oblivion: it is told to give meaning to life; as Sheherazade said: «it is told not only to save life but to live; it is told not only to fight death but to give life. To narrate not only opens the dream dimension to the construction of a fantasy heritage, but it is also an occasion for reflection, denunciation, rethinking, pushing for change»¹⁴.

The project of narration, countless stories

In the eventuality of a double loneliness for those who embark on a migratory journey, being deprived of their own culture, and the difficulty of organizing their memories, can lead to a kind of confusion and sense of extraction where difficulty in thinking and giving order to one's own life clearly emerges.

In March and April, and then September and October 2016, some asylum seekers hosted at the reception facilities of the Diakonia Onlus Association¹⁵ (in which the Ruah Social Cooperative provides reception staff) participated, in collaboration with Tantemani Serigrafia Cooperative Social Patronage San Vincenzo¹⁶, in the "Innumerevoli"

⁷ ČURKOVIĆ J., (2006). Tra memoria ed oblio. Alcuni aspetti antropologici ed etici nella costruzione dell'identità. *StMor*, n. 44, p. 491.

⁸ CANDAU J., (2002). *La memoria e l'identità*, Naples, Ipermedium, p. 16.

⁹ ADAMCZEWSKI W. H., (2007). *Il significato del dialogo nell'incontro interumano alla luce della filosofia di Levinas*, Roma, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, p. 39.

¹⁰ LÉVINAS E., (2010). *L'epifania del volto*, Milano, Servitium.

¹¹ MANCINI I., (1989). *Tornino i volti*, Genova, Marietti, p. 49.

¹² SARTRE J.P., (1972). *L'universale singolare*, Milan, Il Saggiatore.

¹³ FABRI M., (2014). Procedere per narrazioni. Pedagogia del "volto" e terziarietà. *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, n. 9, pp. 123-146.

¹⁴ BESEGGHI E., (2003). *Infanzia e racconto. Il libro, le figure, la voce, lo sguardo*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, p.29.

¹⁵ Caritas Diocesana Bergamasca, Associazione Diakonia Onlus, Sede legale presso Via del Conventino, 8 - 24125 Bergamo.

¹⁶ Cooperativa Sociale Patronato San Vincenzo, Serigrafia Tantemani, Sede Legale presso Via Gavazzeni, 3 - 24126 Bergamo.

project¹⁷. This was a narrative and screen-printing workshop that led to the creation of a collective exhibition in the city of Bergamo, during the Cooperative Unions' events (held from 14 to 19 June 2016 in Lazzaretto Park), to then continue as a travelling exhibit at the parishes of the The Diocese of Bergamo.

The workshop was divided into small groups of five asylum seekers, each accompanied by their own drafts of a self-portrait which contained a series of narrative elements – the result of the several experiences they wished to recount and share. The technical printing method of silk-screen printing was then used to print each self-portrait onto a t-shirt and poster that the subject could bring to their own reception facility. I entered this workshop under a training project, in order to be able to prove that self-narrative can be a self-study tool. The project therefore involved nine asylum seekers from the "Innumerevoli" silk screening project and eight pre-silk-screening asylum seekers; the first group were at the reception facilities of Castagneta¹⁸ in Città Alta di Bergamo and the former seat of BergamoTV¹⁹, and the second group at Casazza²⁰ and Botta di Sedrina²¹.

A workbook was prepared for each participant with all the tools necessary for the course, according to the steps foreseen for the project itself. Based on the subjects with whom we met, it was written in Italian, English or French. For those who participated in the workshop after the screen-printing, the work was divided into five different stages.

In the first stage, they presented their entire workshop, specifically its objectives. A brief summary was provided for the exhibition, so visitors could better interpret the stories on show. In this first step, each guest was also invited to question what the note said, and to freely add details that could best express their own story.

In the second stage a diagram was drawn up, so as to structure the narrative of one's own story by the elements that were significant to the experience: namely, the country of origin, the family, the journey, the desires, the fear that characterised certain significant moments, and the short-term goals.

In the third stage, time was devoted to the actual writing of every asylum seeker's experience. Some of them wrote it themselves, choosing the French or English language, whilst others who could not write preferred to dictate their story.

In the fourth stage the choice of the autobiographical method was shared with them as a privileged instrument of the workshop, emphasizing in particular the identification of the specific elements of identity.

In the last stage, each participant took part in an evaluation interview and a questionnaire.

Awareness, as Tobie Nathan points out, is that «The foreigner, even the most impoverished, is rich in languages that he holds; full of scents and feelings; and especially rich in explanations, in living beings, and in the aims he achieves, by the magic of the journey" and through the narration, "the spokesperson within us; his guests²²».

The epiphany of the face²³ has been possible thank to the ability to re-elaborate events, situations, relationships, feelings, desires. The story of himself becomes a verbal response to *who* that corresponds to the narration of his story, in the story where this someone has already consumed during the time the unrepeatable existence of *an* irreplaceable.

My land and my roots

Within each story, there is a clear need to emphasize the need of the subjects to find a feeling of belonging with their country of origin, many referring specifically to cities or villages located within, in turn, regions:

"I live in Mali, region of Koulikoro [...] my village is called Kati"

The bond created by this sense of belonging creates the fertile ground for active participation in community life, pushing people to build and consolidate responsibility towards the same collective good and, in the deepest form, towards the community²⁴. In a contemporary reality, where the most realistic meaning of nation seems to be a grouping together that is recognized in regulations, this assumes a very different symbolic load for migrants. The

17 <http://tantemani.it/innumerevoli/>

18 Struttura di accoglienza "Castagneta", via Costantino Beltrami, 33 - 24129 Bergamo.

19 Struttura di accoglienza "BergamoTV", via Alfonso Corti, 27b - 24126 Bergamo.

20 Struttura di accoglienza "Casazza", via Aldo Moro, 3a - 24060 Casazza (BG).

21 Struttura di accoglienza "Botta", via Palazzo, 24 - 24010 Sedrina (BG).

22 NATHAN T., (2003). *Non siamo soli al mondo*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri.

23 LÉVINAS E., (2010). *L'epifania del volto*, Milano, Servitium.

24 TRAPANESE R., (2005). *Cittadinanza e politiche sociali*, Naples, Liguori Editore, p 22.

contact with the culture of origin is maintained thanks to the presence of migratory networks, but especially through recollection and memory, which have voice in the narration, as well as the family patterns, creating a double sense of belonging²⁵.

Someone waits for me at home; my family

The family takes on a symbolic role for those who embark on a migratory journey; it is the context in which the decision to migrate, for most individuals, is formulated²⁶. Often the contrasts that they have with it define the motivations:

“In 2013 I decided to leave Bangladesh; I had family problems. My dad had thrown out my mother and married another woman: and I accepted it. We made peace but there were so money problems. So my dad talked to the smugglers who told him to send me to Libya.”

The need to write their parents names is symbolic; a simple word seems to encompass in itself the whole story of an individual, the story of their family, their individuality. Evoking someone by name is a way to make them feel present, to recall all of their being, not to label them in one way or another but to live in their entirety. In this sense, the deep respect for parents is clear:

“I still have both parents, my father is called Bandiougou Magassa and my mom is called Niame Sissiako”

These are the same parents who have permitted the migrant to study, with the awareness that school – at least in the early years – including those in the African and Asian territories, must be a precious ally: it conveys the cultural legacy of the previous generations, opens doors to their community, provides the means necessary for pathways into various professions, and also opens up new horizons²⁷:

“[...] I finish my school in Lahore College and I was graduated from university in «Islamic study, urdu».”

Comparatively, disadvantaged families often see education as an extraneous world, which does not include rules or uses²⁸. In such cases, many are sent to work after their first years of study due to economic necessity:

“I studied for three years at school and then went to work as a carpenter. I did not go to the fields, but I was the only one to work”

Although emigration can be justified, it is always under suspicion for those who invest hope and expectation in the migrant. The latter contains, in secret, the suspicion of "betrayal" from one who is not responding to expectations, of irresponsibility at the limit of denial. Accusation and self-accusation: this is the inevitable foundation of the emigrant's condition and the status of the immigrant²⁹.

I travelled the earth, the sky and the sea

Some leave abandon areas devastated by interstate conflicts and wars, where children are forcibly recruited by military bodies, where freedom of expression, association and assembly are repressed, and where violence against women and indiscriminate practices of torture are perpetrated without being sanctioned by law. The most sensitive areas are Syria, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which are affected by conflicts that cause an ever-increasing number of asylum seekers to flee to those countries, that in turn hold devastating wars.

In this context, we identify in particular the various routes that migrants undertake to reach Europe, with different means of transport:

²⁵ SASSEN S., (1999). *Migranti, coloni, rifugiati. Dall'emigrazione di massa alla fortezza Europa*, Milan, Feltrinelli.

²⁶ HARBISON S. F., (1981). *Migration Decision making*, New York, Pergamon Press, p. 229.

²⁷ GALLI N., (2002) *Pedagogia della famiglia ed educazione degli adulti*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, p. 406.

²⁸ DELORS J., (1996) *L'éducation. Un trésor est caché dedans, Rapport à l'UNESCO de la Commission internationale sul l'éducation pour ke vingt et unième siècle*, Paris, Editions O. Jacob, p. 115.

²⁹ SAYAD A., (2002) *La doppia assenza. Dalle illusioni dell'emigrato alle sofferenze dell'immigrato*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina Editore, p.187.

“In 2011 I decide to leave Pakistan [...] I went to Iran with an animal truck, I across the desert with jeep [...] arrived in Turkey in van, met some new smuggler and decided to go by car to Ankara and Istanbul. By boat I arrived in Koss (Greece), by ship I went to Athen [...] cross the border on foot and all the Macedonia by car and the same in Serbia and Hungary. I arrived in Austria by car [...] I went to Germany by train. They control me and I stay there for three years at the end I arrived in Italy in 2015.”

Those who flee often choose to do so on case-by-case basis, according to the needs of the moment and the "occasions" presented by the State to cross the borders. In West Africa, the Niger Desert is one of the crosses that claims a high number of victims, who travelled by illegal trafficking routes which are now being used for human trafficking:

“I have some problem so I decide to leave Ghana to Burkina Faso ad after I go to Niger by car. I stayed one week in Niger and after I decided go to Libya.”

Migrants are willing to spend a lot of money to embark on their voyages, even if it means going into debt. Specifically, travel is purchased through money transfer or through hawala³⁰. (a transaction system based on the word of Islamic law). There is also an agreement on how to behave once arrived, for escaping the controls and fingerprinting and, on having arrived, to pay further in the countries of North-Europe:

“In Libya, I worked as a waiter, there they beat me and I saw a Libyan man shot by a thief who took the money, I was scared and there were so many problems. I paid 1900 Libyan money (about €1200) to come to Italy by boat [...]. [...].”

The previous migration experiences of the individuals or their relatives, the ties established between places of origin and destination, the existence of support devices, the functioning of family chains, and information flows, appear at least as important as economic calculations in the explanation of arrivals and departures.

If dreams are wishes

When the traveller leaves, he retreats from the consolidated structure of his daily life made of dreams and needs. He must find ways and means to achieve some and satisfy others. Getting started requires trusting strangers and losing sight of home comforts, family and friends. You are constantly feeling out of balance. The family element exists even in the discussion about symbolic dreams; some migrants, especially older adults, think of migration only as a pause from their own lives, dreaming of returning to reunite with their families in their country of origin:

“My dream is to continue my work here and reunite with my family in Nigeria.”

In other stories, the stress is also on the desire to improve one's life and on the self-realization related to the experience of migration³¹:

“My dream is to live in Italy, in Milan, where I agreed with a friend that when I get the papers he will give me a job as a waiter”

In this perspective, many asylum seekers, in addition to their work expectations, are projecting the dream of building their own future in our country through the support of local, associative or municipal structured networks supporting them in resuming or seeking work and dreaming of marriage and children:

“In the future I will married and also built home. I want to meet girl, not problem if she is black or white. I want to stay in Italy.”

Finally, among the various stories, there are also some dreams related to personal wellbeing and the awareness of the gift of peace and serenity, even before material well-being:

“From my future I want to meet peace for myself to have good relationship with other people. Now in

³⁰ EL QORCHI M., (2003). *Informal Founds Transfer System: An Analysis of the Informal Hawala System*, International Monetary Found, Washington, D.C., p.22

³¹ AA. VV., (2012). *Dal silenzio alla parola. La violenza sofferta e il desiderio di fermarla*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, p. 66.

Italy I want to find calm and easy job, like farmer that is in contact with nature and world.”

The dream is that mental activity, which becomes context, where we can let loose, without limits or fears, our desires and expectations, allowing us to play and reconcile with time, and to nourish every single moment of our life with the strength and intensity that stimulates us to push forward, always and in every case.

Beyond the limits of fear

There are many ways to tell a war. Some are so deeply rooted in the global collective imagery that they form metaphorical interpretative tools capable of describing any type of war, such as the one slowly hitting African territories and animating the days with the feeling of fear. It is these local wars and clashes that convince and induce people to embark on a migratory journey:

“When I was attack by a group of people with knife and sticks in my country [...].”

No journey is free from an encounter, and those who travel have to be decentralized, open and meet to this³². However, not all the encounters that migrants experience during their journey are positive: on one hand, some meet other people who become companions in their shared desire and purpose; yet on the other hand, many are robbed and humiliated:

“I saw a Libyan man shot by a thief who took the money [...].”

Many are unaware of the dangers and risks of migration through traffickers, not only at sea or in the desert, but also in transit countries such as Libya³³:

“In Libya I was at Bahai-Sabaha in Tripoli [...] spending a month in jail. I was beaten.”

In a Libya without stability, the lives of migrants are a real hell: many end up in centers that are basically prisons, with stories of torture, food and water deprivation, and continual violence:

“In Libya I have a lot of problem, when I was in prison people hurt me; my hand, heart and arm have element of fire.”

Many migrants have traumas, usually associated with violent events, that sometimes indicate a point of no return, causing problems that will affect the subject's experience for the rest of their lives³⁴.

Every day I pursue a goal that is important to me

If migrants' human rights are always defended and sustained in institutional documents, the tension between idealism and reality, the opening and closing of frontiers and opportunities, is manifested in both political action and in these dreamed documents that formalize such political policies³⁵. In addition to the desire to be in possession of documents, the acquisition of basic Italian language skills is fundamental. Learning a foreign language means not only being able to express and be heard by developing linguistic-communicative skills, but also to open oneself to other cultures and access other world visions³⁶:

“In the future I want to stay in Italy [...], now I go to school to learn Italian language.”

In each narrative, there is a clear need to be heard and acknowledged, the need to not be discriminated, but valued in their own cultural characteristics. In the absence of such recognition, one might feel discredited and

³² Cfr. BARALDI C., (2003). *Comunicazione interculturale e diversità*, Rome, Carocci.

³³ Cfr. PANELLA C., (2015). *Il libro nero del califfato: La guerra di civiltà dello scisma islamico*, Milan, BUR.

³⁴ GIUDICI C., WIHTOL DE WEDEN C., (2016). *I nuovi movimenti migratori. Il diritto alla mobilità e le politiche di accoglienza*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, p. 123.

³⁵ DONADIO P., GABRIELLI G., MASSARI M., (2014). *Uno come te. Europei e nuovi europei nei percorsi di integrazione*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, p. 92.

³⁶ Cfr. BARNI M., (2001). *La questione della lingua per gli immigrati stranieri*, Milan, FrancoAngeli.

marginalized. On the other hand, respect for one's own cultural characteristics contributes to enhancing identity and thus to building a positive self-image³⁷.

On my face is my story

Art speaks for itself. But when it comes to recounting a journey, words can be a story's precious ally. For this reason, during the exhibition organized at the city of Bergamo³⁸, it was suggested to accompany the works carried out with these words: They are the product of those who have listened to the stories that inspired them, and echoes of those who collected their stories before they became an image. The face tells stories; it is the collection of all the elements now put into consideration. Here are some examples of these portraits.



I. P., 20 years old

Ghana, hosted in Castagneta

"If you do good things, you will receive good things." Like with a sweet melody, you let yourself be cradled by the waves of the sea and hope in life, remembering that whatever you decide to do, you must make sure you are happy. So Isaac now smiles at a cup of tea and in sweet company hopes for the future.

D. I., 19 years old

Mali, hosted at Bergamo TV

"The serpent that can not shed its skin dies. The same thing happens to spirits which are prevented from having hope." So Ibrahim entrusts himself to those who have welcomed him. He travels nostalgically by car under the stars of the sky to the heart of his beloved land, family and home in Mali. "They will celebrate, they will dance, and they will wait for the sun to rise another day."



R. A., 27 years old

Nigeria, hosted in Castagneta

"I drowned bad words, I walked miles and dreamed of a beautiful destination, I pushed past the window grates and now I dance." "I can do everything with the One who makes me strong," Remy whispers, thanking a God who he will never forget and who now leaves him to play out the game of life.

³⁷ DEMETRIO D., FAVARO G., (1993). *Pedagogia e didattica interculturale nella scuola. Per nuove quotidianità educative*, in MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, *Migrazioni e società multiculturale: il ruolo della scuola*, Rome, Atti del seminario di Punta Ala, Roma p. 148.

³⁸ *Happening delle cooperative*, Parco del Lazzaretto, 250121 Bergamo, 14-19 June 2016.



P. L. 24 years old
Nigeria, hosted in Casazza
The car has become a material item without which we feel naked, uncertain and incomplete in urban complexity; it is perhaps for this wants to become a driver, leaving behind the selling of clothes that gave him life when he was in Nigeria. With roots in his beloved Niger, he hopes to flourish in the West which hosts him.

M. M., 18 years old
Guinea Conakry, hosted in Botta di Sadrina
Love is a fruit that matures in every season and is always at the reach of each and every hand. The memory that Mohamed has of his companion, who he hopes to re-embrace, is as sweet as mango. The heart has stalked far from his land, Africa stitches its limbs from which tearing hopes will shed new flowers.



A. F., 20 years old
Ghana, hosted in Botta di Sadrina
Life will divide you sooner or later, if not with this, it will be with something else. But even if you are distant, even if you are far away, you will always be brothers; Fuseini repeats this after having split from his brother in Libya. They departed from Ghana with a shared hope, and now all that's left is to play the game of life, without fun, but with the awareness of being lucky.

Who tells the story, who dreams and who identifies it

In each context and historical period, accepting the foreigner, the stranger – the one who is different from us and our culture – is never easy; it is, in fact, very difficult. But in the same way, it is terribly difficult to escape from your own land by abandoning everything - goods, mothers, fathers, children, companions - to throw it all away in a desperate salvation from war and despair.

Through the workshop, a collection of tales has been produced, which force the writer to return to the asylum seeker, his original task: to give voice to those who often do not have a voice due to fear or lack of listening, or simply to accompany them in recounting and building, through the salvific instrument that only words can represent, a path of reflection, dialogue and hope. A world in which every story, even the most tragic, can find a trajectory of change, transformation and self-formation.

The self-narration is therefore an important moment in the formation of each one of us, a powerful self-training tool. In particular, it forces the subject to problematically return to himself, becoming the actor. The ego acquires a sense and an identity, becomes active on the scene of his existence. This narrative process of the "I" is, in reality, a formative process, a path of formation that the subject carries out in himself and from himself: a self-training process. This operation, however, does not arise exclusively from the need to tell us outside, but from the need to make sense of what happens to us, to link the different events that dot our existence along a temporal and spatial dimension. Rebuilding a story becomes then a construction of a piece of life, remolding parts of himself, representations of own identity and social context aimed both at dreaming and at recognizing himself.