Visa Stories

Visa Stories:
Experiences between Law and Migration

Edited by

Filippo Menozzi, Bahriye Kemal
and Tinashe Mushakavanhu

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For Osman Rasul Mohammed

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PREFACE

Bahriye: Do you remember that my visa story was first shared, in September 2009, during our journeys between the University of Kent and Canterbury West train station? My visa story was at that time the dominant narrative in my life—it was in its early stages of birth and the wounds it created still open and opening—the case and its results were materialised in August 2009. I told you about the painful experience of my husband being refused an entry clearance into the UK, me having to start a life in Canterbury without him, and our appeal process—our odyssey—to find a way to reunite. My story centred on the appeal process that I was experiencing at the time, my journey from one institution to the next and the doors of each that were closing. I told you how the institutions didn't listen and that they told me not to "speak" but to "write" my case on applications and appeal forms with supporting documents. Back then I felt isolated, no one in these institutions cared for or shared my story or vulnerability; but instead made me more vulnerable by asking for more documents that exposed my life and relationship.

Filippo: I remember, and I thank you Bahriye for accepting to go back to those troubled moments and choose to remember, and talk to me about your story. The essential thing is the fact that we share our stories, that our stories are not being lost, so that even when they have ended, a trace of them remains for us to reflect and think. That story, as you say, was the dominant story in that moment, it was the dominant narrative in your life. I think that there are so many people whose story is determined and dominated by a visa story, and yet it is so easy to feel alone, to feel like your story will never be listened to, that no one will hear.

Tinashe: I experienced your story as I listened to you tell it. It was comforting in a sense to know that I was not the only one or that my story was not the only story. There were many stories like my story. The pain of exile, of being away is not just in the distance from home and family, but in being misunderstood by those who have become your neighbours or colleagues. It doesn't matter where you go in the world; you remain a victim of where you come from. In my travels, I have had to face many humiliating moments because of a piece of paper stamped in my passport—a visa. It was sobering to know there were many other people who had survived the same or worse visa ordeals, and they were even prepared to make the world aware of its prejudices and arrogance towards other human beings who are different and supposedly of inferior backgrounds.

Bahriye: Exactly, and while at the beginning no one wanted to listen, eventually I did find one institution that listened. During my first year as a PhD student in the Colonial and Postcolonial Centre at the University of Kent, members of the academic staff and students did let me speak. I thank my supervisors for listening to me during our PhD supervision meetings and I also thank other friends at the University for listening to my visa story during walks to and from the postcolonial seminars. Most of all, however, Filippo and Tinashe, you both let me speak and listened. I thank you and remain massively indebted to you for listening, throughout the months, to my narrative and making my vulnerability and story your vulnerability and story of immigration. Tinashe, I also thank you for sharing your story and making your story my story of immigration.

Filippo: Yes, the University can be a more hospitable form of institution. I think this fact is very important, that you found a space to speak in a context of study and research. The University should be able to make the most of its ability to be a more receptive environment, where the research and teaching activities are able to have spaces where voices of students can be heard, not

only from a professional or academic perspective, but also as human beings. I was wondering whether sharing your experience with us contributed in any form to your formation as a student? What do you think are the implications of your visa story for your life as a student, a researcher? After all, the field of postcolonial studies, which is the subject of our PhD projects, partly originated from stories of migration, especially migration from the South to the North, and it derives from the personal experiences of people who had to migrate, and who certainly went through visa stories. I remember what Edward Said wrote about the exile and the migrant, and the incredible potential that travelling across countries and borders could give to all of us. An immense richness. Yet, when discourses on migration are monopolised by statistics and economic or political calculation, this incredible richness provided by our personal stories gets inexorably lost. A way should be found to re-connect the academic debate on migration to the human experiences that compose the reality of migrants' lives, our everyday experiences, our stories, in a way that is able to render the nuances, the suffering and all the complexities of this kind of situations. Maybe this is where the literary could bring about a radical change, an as yet unexplored perspective?

Bahriye: Yes, indeed. Though very thankful that finally people were listening to my story, I felt that just speaking and sharing my story—in the course of our walks to the station and seminars, between the corridors of the English department and during supervisions in offices—was not comforting enough. I searched for an academic discipline, a conference, a book or some kind of medium that was dedicated to the visa experience. I wanted an official place where more people could listen to my story, but more so I wanted a place where it was not just me speaking and others listening but instead a place where I and others “speak” and write of the visa experience. I wanted to find a place beyond the immigration institutions and organisation that constantly demanded forms, data and supporting documents. Like

you suggested Filippo, “A place where my story becomes your story and your story becomes my story of immigration”; a place for visa victims, where we not only exchanged our stories—speaking and writing about our visa experiences—but also a network where we could actively impact on the policy of immigration. Back then I searched, struggled and failed to find an institution, a book, a module or some kind of discipline with such a research network.

Filippo: Well, there are networks and disciplines that are concerned with this issue, for example at Kent, the Law School and the Social Sciences department are doing a great job in voicing, supporting, teaching and researching the migration case. It is very important that the spaces for listening to and sharing our stories are created within an institution of some kind, yet in a way that could also connect different departments or people from different backgrounds, who could have been experiencing similar stories! The point was to create a venue, a space, where people could have the freedom to connect their personal story to their academic research in an innovative way. We wanted to create a space where people would not be defined or identified by their documents, their *charta vistas*, but rather where they could introduce themselves and tell us about their past and present vicissitudes, their dreams and their anxieties. Eventually we conceptualised a project to provide this space.

Tinashe: The idea of a visa stories workshop appealed to me simply because we were attempting to bring into dialogue diverse voices to share their visa narratives. Many people suffer in silence. Their stories die with them. And if only they had spoken or listened to others speak about their own horrific experiences, they could have lived knowing they are not alone in the world. I faced many frustrating moments from university officials who knew nothing about the pains of applying for a visa. For me, the workshop was also important to address institutional failures that could be avoided with a little bit of education. But often the moments that our

political and social institutions reserve for migrants are fraught with haunting silence, their stories suppressed or distorted by legal strictures and language barriers. Literature can help liberate the migrant's story from silence.

Bahriye: Yes, as we were imagining the workshop, I thought "Finally this is my time and our time to record and recover the visa victimisation that we suffer. To share what has happened and create a field of enquiry for those it will happen to." This is why I embarked on the first stage—workshop—of this project, so finally I could find a network, a place where I could speak of my story and be spoken to and you could speak of your story. Finally my story could be recorded with its vulnerability beyond the immigration case file, and become part of a broader discourse on migration.

Tinashe: Indeed, the issue of migration is much bigger than it was in the past. The world is fluid. There is a lot of coming and going in the world these days, a thick stew of people in heavy conversation not only with each other, but with the world around them. Visa regimes are meant to curb this flow. I liked the idea of the workshop from the moment we discussed it, of course, as a serious review of migration today, the visa process, and as an exploration of the shifting dynamics of migration and global citizenship. I was also eager to listen to accounts, both fictional and autobiographical, about visas from "real" people who go through the processes of acquiring them. The workshop certainly helped to reveal complex emotions, contradictory experiences, fragmented memories, and disrupted chronologies making these individual testimonies a collective rendering of the visa experience, whether in Africa, America, Asia and Europe.

The workshop "Visa Stories: Experiences between Law and Migration" that grew out of these dialogues, thoughts and stories, was held at the University of Kent on the 21st October 2011 and was sponsored by the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies. This book is a continuation

of these dialogues. They have been collected and inscribed into a place we have called the visa narrative genre. We hope that this book could be a way of introducing these stories so that they are not lost. For this reason, this work aims to be a way of liberating the migrant's story from silence—either within a literary genre, listed in a module syllabus, on a library bookshelf, or, maybe, just simply in your hands.

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The Editors

INTRODUCTION

FILIPPO MENOZZI

> You are writing a different story, and the subject *for* that story, not so much a subject *of* that history or the world-historical subject...but a new narrativization. History, is after all, a storying. (Spivak 1996, 25)

This volume proposes a collection of stories, written by authors and academics working in different fields and from various cultural and social backgrounds, and aims at making a contribution to a broad context of discussion and research on migration, both within and outside the academy. In fact, in its explicit objective and implicit set of assumptions, this collective work intends to introduce into debates and discourses on migration a new subject, an as yet unexplored terrain of dialogue and expression which might be named the "visa narrative" genre. Situated between the critical and the creative, the academic and the autobiographical, this genre of storytelling or personal report may open novel pathways of enquiry into those structures of feeling which characterise inter-cultural contact in a time when, as Seyla Benhabib notices in an important work, transnational migratory movements overlap with a widespread "crisis of territoriality." (Benhabib 2004, 4-5). With their focus on iconic interstitial places—or rather non-places, following Marc Augé's renowned "supermodern" qualification (Augé 1995)—such as airports, detention centres, immigration offices, check-ins and borders, visa narratives may provide a significant insight into the everyday experiential ground of many people moving across borders, in every part of the globe, or attempting to do so, before incurring rejections, denials, delays or refusals. The stories grouped in this book are written by researchers working on migration in various disciplinary fields; thus they reflect and animate an inter-disciplinary multitude ranging from social anthropology to legal studies, international relations and postcolonial literature. They emphasise the diversity and complexity of the subject of migration, a topic whose realities may emerge when approached from a

perspective of involvement rather than detachment, proximity rather than distance, lived experience rather than abstraction. The task of introducing these stories could at first seem not only difficult, because of their inherent diversity and heterogeneity, but also a misleading task, a betrayal of the spirit of the project, which aimed to let peoples and voices introduce themselves, rather than providing the legitimate *charta vista* for them to be accepted in a territory of academic readership. However, the following introduction will attempt to express some views on the "visa narrative" of which the writings assembled in this book are a beginning. Some brief preliminary reflections, which may be considered to be one story among the others, will propose a few thoughts that could be helpful to anyone eager to situate and welcome these narratives. After a few observations on the narrative status of the visa stories presented in the volume, these introductory remarks will make reference to an essay titled "What's the Story?" published in a feminist journal some years ago, which provided some inspiration for the conference from which this collective work originated. In conclusion, before offering an overview of the contents of the book, a definition of the "visa narrative" genre will be advanced, in an attempt to point out how it could make a contribution to some key issues in debates on migration in the humanities and social sciences.

The instance of narrative, in the form of either the acknowledgement of a fictional dimension in scientific knowledge, or the insertion of stories as examples, cases or complementary material for analysis, has assumed visibility and is now widely adopted in the study of migration, as it is in many other branches of the social sciences. As a point of departure, it may be mentioned that canonical works in migration studies in Europe and elsewhere, such as Abdelmalek Sayad's *La Double Absence*, interestingly translated in English as *The Suffering of the Immigrant,* and Aihwa Ong's *Buddha is Hiding*, initiate academic studies of migration with forms of narrative and storytelling, so that the narrative seems to be woven into the words of the researcher rather than being detached from them. Thus, for example, the essay that now constitutes the first chapter of Sayad's classical study is composed of a long first-person report, the troubled life-story of an informant, a Kabyle emigrant, recorded in 1975. The words of this Kabyle informant are preceded by the specification, made by the ethnographer, that the reader is about to encounter a discourse which, in its "opacity" and "authenticity", makes use of specific cultural and linguistic resources to address a situation of foreignness. The short introductory remark concludes, before the real opening of the chapter:

> The opacity of a language that is not immediately comprehensible is perhaps the most important piece of information–or at least the rarest kind

> of information–we could hope for at a time when so many well-intentioned spokesmen are speaking on behalf of emigrants. (Sayad 2004, 7)

In the perspective disclosed by Abdelmalek Sayad, stories directly narrated by informants, in their authenticity and opacity, may have the ability to oppose the configurations of power and knowledge that usually silence the voices of emigrants and immigrants. The interpretative dilfficuty that these stories may pose is hence "the rarest kind of information," the counterpart of a regained possibility of speech. Similarly, Aihwa Ong's methodological preface to her noticeable work on Cambodian refugees in the US contains both autobiographical anecdotes and references to her experience of "commuter fieldwork," characterised by hours spent "listening to tales of brutality, large and small, and crying along with the refugees." (Ong 2003, xvi). The reference to "tales" is immediately followed by the report of a direct, and somehow exemplary, statement of an informant:

> They wanted their stories told, in the words of a Cambodian woman, "so that Americans know how we suffer." She meant not only their experiences during the war years, but also the difficulties encountered in the process of becoming American. (Ong 2003, xvi)

The recognition of the role of narratives in shaping discourses on migration, however, could raise—and needs to raise—different questions and reflections. Thus, on the one hand, one may ask why stories are so important, when other techniques of quantitative and qualitative data collecting may provide us with the same result–the same information, the same conclusion–while evading the literary, problematically unverifiable and "opaque" nature of storytelling. In other words, why are stories, "our" stories, so relevant to the academic study of migration?

As some scholars underline in a recent publication on the function of narrative in history and the social sciences, narratives are important not only for the "contributions they make to specific areas of empirical research", but, more importantly, because they have the potential to "reorient theories about the relationship between the individual and the social by calling attention to the social and cultural dynamics through which individuals construct themselves as social actors" (Maynes, Pierce, Laslett 2008, 2). If individuals take part in social relations and become part of cultural groups and communities through processes that are always, at least in part, narrative dynamics, stories may be a privileged field where we can find those rules, modalities, and contexts that regulate the formation and interaction of social actors. In other words, what may be at

stake in telling stories has something to do with the formation of individual and collective subjectivities, subjects caught, as in every narrative, between the activities of writing and reading, authoring and interpreting. This is what the anthropologist Byron Good characterises as the "synthetic processes" weaving the narrative experience, a description he borrowed from different paradigms in literary criticism. These "synthetic processes" are interpretative practices that involve "shifting viewpoints to follow the perspectives presented by the narrative and the narrator, reconfiguring and revaluing past events and actions" (Good 1994, 144), and "the personal discovery by the reader of significance and new meanings through the experience of reading. . .the personal change the reader experiences as a result of such understanding" (Good 1994, 144). From the point of view of the visa narrative introduced in this volume, the "personal discoveries" and "synthetic processes" implied in narrative practices may allow for a "re-orienting" of social theories about migration. This "re-orienting" may correspond to a passage from the supposedly individual author of the story to the collective experience that is always incorporated in the narrative, and hence inspire new ways of considering migration and its relation to different political and social themes. Furthermore, this "re-orienting" may also be said to imply, quite literally, a "turning Eastward," a move away from the Eurocentrism of migration discourses and the inclusion of non-Western perspectives in the discussion of immigration policies today.

For this reason, and according to the problematic of subject-making involved in these "visa stories," it may be said that visa narratives can be a source of radical change and discovery, in the study of migration as well as in various aspects of social life, in the UK and elsewhere. The starting-point, the most important message conveyed by the stories collected in this book, could be the acknowledgement that these visa narratives are not simply the stories of migrants; they are not "their" stories, but they are "our" stories as well. In fact, rather than being restricted to the account of the informant, the testimony, or the anthropological interlocutor, stories of migration have the potential to become our stories, allowing "us"–however this first person plural subject will be defined–to recognise our closeness, mutuality, and interaction with "them." In a potentially endless activity of reading and re-reading, writing and rewriting, these stories can become *my* stories and, hopefully, *your* stories, as will be explained in the remaining part of this short introduction, with reference to an important reflection on similar narrative instances in the feminist debate.

In an intriguing essay on the narrative question in feminism, the critic Ellen Rooney presents some inspiring statements about stories and

narratives in redefining the relation between academic scholarship and political commitment. She develops her discourse within the field of debate on feminism and it might be followed by Sandro Mezzadra's interesting observation that gender studies can make, and has made, an extremely valuable contribution to the study of migration. In fact, by "contesting precisely the implicit assumption of mainstream research on migratory processes," these studies "have put the subjectivity of the migrant woman into ever sharper focus" (Mezzadra 2004, 270). This focus on subjectivities and the recognition of what Mezzadra calls "the right to escape" may lead us to consider migration as a creatively *social* phenomenon rather than the automatic effect of macro-economic processes.

In a way that is profoundly related to this important remark, the ideas proposed by Ellen Rooney are extremely suggestive and significant, and they may provide a suitable theoretical premise for the visa narrative, understood as a trans-regional and trans-disciplinary genre. A very meaningful expression adopted by Ellen Rooney corresponds to the sentence: I should be able to "tell your story as the story of my feminism." It is unclear whether Ellen Rooney herself coined this sentence or rather borrowed it from some of the authors she quotes, as the quotation marks are not complemented by a specific bibliographical reference in her essay. However, this uncertainty regarding to whom this sentence may "belong," whose story it is, after all, may be part of the structure she develops and articulates, a subject positioning that may be intriguingly adopted in discourses on migration. In this context, it could be translated: this book aims at introducing the idea of telling "your story as the story of my migration," or, more generally, the story of "my commitment," because it is not only the social, legal and juridical processes of immigration or emigration at stake here, but a more profound and extensive commitment to accommodate the entirety of human experiences, as the stories will show. Thus, what does Ellen Rooney mean by this enigmatic expression, an inversion, it may be added, yet an uncannily complementary inversion of Jacques Derrida's enigmatic: "*Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine*" (Derrida 1998, 2)? Derrida's sentence may be said to imply the consciousness of a constitutive otherness at the core of the self. In the most intimate and personal sign of our culture, "our" language, lies a residue of irreducible alterity that threatens the very formation of a sense of belonging.

The obverse of Derrida's sentence, emphasised in the narrative dimension elaborated by Ellen Rooney, may sound something like: "I do not have only one story, yet it is my story." The author herself explains:

> But what can it mean to tell "your story as the story of my feminism"? It is

> not an instance of speaking for, nor an effort to tease "your" proper feminism out of "your" narrative, not, in other words, a decoding or translation. Rather, this construction of the relation between a narrative and a feminism enacts apostrophe as it travels across political and communal boundaries. Your stories will win you a place in other people's feminisms. This program is not, of course, proof against the pitfalls of appropriation and power/knowledge that racial, national, sexual, and class differences and conflicts have hedged all around us. (Rooney 1996, 15-16).

Two important things may be conserved and maintained from this excerpt: there is always a risk of appropriation at stake in telling stories, of ignoring and obliterating differences that, even though they have to be challenged, need to be acknowledged and pondered, even when we do not "speak for" or "on behalf of" someone else. Also, these stories "travel across political and communal boundaries." This is the power of stories *par excellence*, the power of narrative, if there is one (and I am not sure whether "power" is the right word at all), as structuralist thinkers Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, among others, deeply understood. A narrative is always a chain of transformations, relays, borrowings, interactions. As Roland Barthes famously pointed out in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," there are "countless forms of narrative in the world," and this happens because the "infinite variety" of storytelling belongs to any cultural group, any time, any place, to the extent that "there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative" (Barthes 1975, 237). It may also be highlighted that, to define the extension of narrative beyond any division or partition, Barthes used some adjectives, "international and transcultural," which may be applied to the visa narrative that this book introduces. By remaking and questioning the subject of migration, these stories are able to move from one place, or one group, to another, as agents of trans-cultural and inter-national contact and exchange.

The result of this power of storytelling may be the awareness that, while people are sometimes violently caged and trapped, forcefully and cruelly deported, kept outside, on the other side of the border, excluded or secluded, or even silenced, their stories, and we can be sure that there will be some, however, will travel, will not be stopped and will, potentially, become our stories too. The excerpt from Ellen Rooney's inspiring work also states that "your stories will win a place in other people's feminism." This sentence could mean appropriation and travel, re-writing and border-crossing, but also something more, something more radical, which implies a reconsideration of the subject of stories, our stories. For understanding this remaking of the narrative subject, another passage can be very useful:

> When my story is written into the other woman's feminism, it can only be by means of an apostrophe or address that I cannot anticipate. The check on appropriation and cooptation lies not in some prophylactic disengagement from stories that are not our own, but from the necessary vulnerability of such a reading to critique, rereading, and dismissal. This is not a matter of intention, generosity, or good will. When you take up a narrative other than your own, you announce your place in an open and heterogeneous field. No matter how you present (or try to defend) this move, your addressee will feel more than free to come to you with yet another reading (Rooney 1996, 18)

Perhaps the key word, the term that is most explicative and suggestive, is "vulnerability." A vulnerable space may be understood as an interstitial place, located between the force of commitment, political commitment, and the other side of this force, disengagement or detachment, which always bears the mark of an unrecognised or unimagined political positioning. It is a place of exposure, of putting oneself at risk, exhibiting oneself to critique, rereading, and dismissal. For each one of us, telling our "visa story" was and is an exposure, a moment in which we are vulnerable, in which we "announce our place in an open and heterogeneous field." Yet, this vulnerability could be that power that makes stories so essential, it is that aspect that discloses their potential to cross borders and to be told from changing perspectives. For their very vulnerability and by becoming part of other people's lives, they are always more than simply "our" stories. The moment in which "I" recognise that I am able to tell your story as the story of my commitment is the moment in which your story is shown in its vulnerability, something which I assume in that very moment, when I say: 'your story is my story', and thus I become, in my turn, vulnerable and different. Telling stories is to transmit something of ourselves to someone else; it is the most effective form of communication, interestingly defined by Sayad as "opacity." Ellen Rooney meditates upon some examples of this particular vulnerability and opacity, enacted by the movement of stories. One example is that of Nina Auerbach's "impure feminist anger," a case of political responsibility which neither displaces "feminism away from the speaker nor rests comfortably with the notion of telling one's own story, one's story 'as a woman,' one's 'native' story." (Rooney 1996, 18).

Telling your story as the story of my experience means finding that vulnerable space where we can communicate, where "I," the subject of the story, is no longer an individual, an isolated subject, but rather a collective one, part of an intertwined web of stories, histories of sharing and transmission. It is something that the critic Gayatri Spivak, Ellen Rooney's

other example, characterised very well in an interview quoted in the same article by Rooney, which I quote from a different source, where I encountered it for the first time, Spivak's *Outside in the Teaching Machine*:

> I believe that the way to save oneself from either objective, disinterested positioning or the attitude of there being no author (and these two opposed positions legitimize each other), or yet *the* story of one's life, is to "recognize" oneself as also an instantiation of historical and psychosexual narratives that one can piece together, however fragmentarily, in order to do deontological work in the humanities. When one represents oneself in such a way, it becomes, curiously enough, a deidentification of oneself, a claiming of an identity from a text that comes from somewhere else. (Spivak 1993, 6)

Maybe, what these visa narratives would like to propose is a new form of responsibility, in which discourses on migration may take part in a process of "deidentification of oneself," rethinking and remaking ourselves through stories that come from somewhere else, so that other people's stories can become our stories as well, and that our story can be written into someone else's life. Ultimately, this could be the role of stories, the reason for their being relevant to the study of migration, beyond narrative or hermeneutic or symbolic frameworks, which we can adopt or dismiss, read and reread, endorse or critique. Thus, in the specific case of this book, the visa narratives collected and proposed to the reader, such stories can redefine the perspective of the migrant, the "structures of attitude and reference" revealed by the experience of forced or voluntary transnational movement, those "structures of location and geographical reference [that] appear in the natural languages of literature, history, or ethnography, sometimes allusively and sometimes carefully plotted" (Said 1993, 61). These feelings, attitudes and references may be conceived of as a perspective that we can adopt, that we can understand as *our own*, even if we are not "migrants" ourselves, even though there are so many ways of travelling around the world that no single migrant can be the only one, no single story can be told as being the only one. Yet the de-identification implied in the positioning of the subject of these stories, in the reader as well as the writer, occupies an evocatively borderline location, a place that metaphorically resonates with a concrete space of arrival and departure, separation and conjunction. Both physical and emotionally charged, this place of storytelling and commitment is neither "objective" nor "subjective," neither "authorless" nor "authoritative." By evoking Edward Said's unforgettable meditations on exile and the academic migrant, this

narrative space may point towards a new kind of "freedom," which could reintroduce a human dimension in the sovereign power of immigration control and the performative value of documents of identity—passports, visas, certificates, applications:

> Our model for academic freedom should therefore be the migrant or traveler: for if, in the real world outside the academy, we must needs be ourselves and only ourselves, inside the academy we should be able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure. But, most essentially, in this joint discovery, of self and Other, it is the role of the academy to transform what might be conflict, or contest, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, and creative interaction. (Said 1991, 17-18)

This kind of freedom, which Said characterised as being the defining possibility of the academy, may be the beginning for a transformation of conflict and antagonism into commonality and recognition, a power or potential that the space of de-identification might open up, telling your story as my story, that vulnerability that Spivak defined in her interview as being neither detached from, nor exclusively held by the bearer of its identity. It is this freedom that could have the power to undo what two Italian political thinkers, Sandro Mezzadra and Alessandro Dal Lago (2002), portray as the "global constraint" on human mobility, a highly representative sign of our time, rather than celebratory images of fast and virtual inter-connection concealing realities of exclusion and immobility. According to Mezzadra and Dal Lago, the global constraint ideologically functions by coding the migrant as the "other," the uninvited guest whose existence and legal status are often reduced to those of a "non-person," and immigration itself is criminalised, in the most violent negation of that freedom which Edward Said hinted at, and which would be the only condition for "your" story to become "my" story, for understanding the other as a part of ourselves, and ourselves as part of others' lives. Mezzadra and Dal Lago show that the definition of the immigrant as irreducibly alien, an unassimilable other that cannot aspire to the recognition of a full citizenship, to being part of the national body, is a move ultimately necessary to the maintenance of global economic inequalities and asymmetries. According to Mezzadra and Dal Lago, the immobility and alterity of the immigrant are part and parcel of a system of neo-colonial exploitation, which maintains a geo-politically differentiated global order.

Even though the negation of the freedom of movement is an important aspect of the way in which other people's stories are prevented from

becoming our stories, Etienne Balibar's response to Mezzadra and Dal Lago should be mentioned in this context. Balibar's focus on notions of diaspora rather than the right to escape or freedom of movement, and his insistence on a broader, more comprehensive idea of freedom, which includes but is not limited to the "deterritorialised" flow incarnated by the migrant, points to an important subject in current migration studies, one which the category "visa narrative" may be able to foreground:

> Surely freedom of movement is a basic claim that must be incorporated within the citizenship of all people (and not only for representatives of the "powerful nations," for whom this is largely a given). But the *droit de cité* (rights to full citizenship) includes everything from residential rights as part of having a "normal" place in society to the exercise of political rights in those locations and groupings into which individuals and groups have been "thrown" by history and the economy. Let's not be afraid of saying it: these citizenship rights include the manner of their belonging in state communities, even, and indeed especially, if they belong to more than one such community. (Balibar 2003, 42).

Accordingly, *Visa Stories* does not limit its scope to showing the difficulty of movement and the reassertion of territorial powers in the contemporary "globalised" world, but, more radically, the book would like to relate a critique of the ideological criminalisation and "othering" of the migrant to Balibar's gesturing towards a more comprehensive notion of freedom, a concept that could somehow resonate with Seyla Benhabib's definition of a "human right to membership." From a perspective that is different from those of Balibar and Mezzadra, Benhabib claims that civil and political rights should be considered as essential human rights and that the possibility of inclusion into a national community should never be precluded (134-146). The recognition of an inalienable right to be part of a political community, of a *socius*, is what the "visa narrative" genre may emphasise, by pointing to the human experience involved in transnational movement, and to the complexity of the lives and stories of people "thrown" by history into one place or the other, or choosing to move away from their country of birth. Visa narratives may bring to the fore those mechanisms transforming citizens and human beings into "aliens" or "non-persons," denouncing and exhibiting the production of statelessness that prevents people from fully participating in the social and political life of a country.

To conclude, the visa narrative that this volume introduces may be characterised by four main aspects: the first is the idea of exploring new ways of writing about migration, and in particular the experience of

crossing borders and moving from one country to another. This idea implies that visa narratives are situated between the academic and the literary. In their combination of genres and styles, they may surprise the reader with their accommodation of autobiography and narrative creation. Thus, and this is the second aspect that could be underlined, visa narratives represent an international and transcultural genre of writing, which is not restricted to a particular cultural or historical or social experience. In its transcultural and sometimes experimental dimension, this innovative way of writing should be able to emphasise different aspects of migration that more canonically detached theoretical or analytical works are not able to consider.

A third element of the visa narrative genre is the idea of being part of a process of "deidentification of oneself." In other word, while sometimes these stories are written by using the first person, and while usually containing autobiographical anecdotes, they refer to dynamics of international movement, such as application processes, document control, rejections and deportation, which are by no means restricted to a single cultural or social group, of which the speakers may be representative. Visa narratives may become "our" stories, may have a place in our story, because they are narrative spaces of vulnerability and contact in which the story of the individual is located in a field of collective experience that moves beyond national boundaries and beyond identity politics. This aspect may lead us to the last, crucial factor that should be mentioned, the idea that visa narratives may point to a discourse on freedom—freedom of movement, but also freedom to take part in social and political life—which is at the basis of current debates on migration and citizenship in different areas of the humanities and social sciences.

Therefore, rather than being restricted to what Keya Ganguly interestingly calls the "active ideological terrain on which people represent themselves to themselves" (Ganguly 29) in the enunciation of cultural identities or the construction of a postcolonial migrant identity, visa narratives may become a way of questioning the very production of belongings as well as a way of connecting issues of migration control to broader social and political fields. From this point of view, visa narratives should be able to overcome that "denial of the reality of the encounter," the encounter with migrants, with other peoples and other places—which, according to Balibar, is deeply related to the constitution of the figure of the "alien" in the register of the imaginary (Balibar 2005, 30). On the contrary, visa stories are enunciated from the perspective of the real encounters with other people, a situation in which the other is not produced as fantasised object, but rather recognised as a human subject,

and the stories are not told from “themselves to themselves,” but rather circulate and travel from “them” to “us” and then to someone else, in a series of acts of sharing and transmission.

The first two stories included in this volume recount the experience of people living with a “life sentence” as a consequence of their immigration status and the deadlines, applications, and refusals that this may imply. The first story is about a Cypriot—a victim of the political situation in Cyprus - who has been condemned to being of “unknown origin” attempting to gain his right for a UK spouse settlement visa, while the second is narrated by a Zimbabwean student trying to move in Europe and elsewhere with a Zimbabwean passport. Chapter 3 narrates the problem for institutions and academic research centres attempting to obtain visa permits for students in an age of international distrust.. The fourth story re-writes the history of an academic, writer and traveller of the past, Ibn Battuta, who “didn't need a visa” to get to know the lives and customs of other cultures, and may well exemplify Edward Said's model of academic freedom. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are told by social scientists working on migration, and they capture those moments in which the study of migration cannot be approached as a detached “object” of study but, rather, becomes part of everyday life, be it in the form of stories transmitted from mother to daughter in Filipino communities in the UK and USA, the place of birth of a Belgian citizen, or the case of the deportation of a researcher trying to attend a conference on migration in Brazil. Chapter 8 is both a migration and a love story. Chapters 9 and 10 deal with the experiences of refugees and exiled peoples. They draw on the testimonies collected by members of Kent Refugee Help, an association working at the Detention Centre in Dover, and the personal story of an exiled woman from Cyprus respectively. The last story is taken from the experience of a lecturer in legal studies and narrates in fictional form the lack of communication and reciprocal understanding that could happen in immigration offices.

We hope the reader will approach the interesting contributions included in this volume, knowingly subject to re-reading and critique, but also open to our stories and ready to allow them to become, in your reading, your stories too; these stories are your story of migration, your story and my story, the ongoing weaving of an unfinished, shared history.

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