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USING COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION-MAKING TO ENGAGE WITH THE REPRESENTATIONS OF NIGERIAN WOMEN IN PALERMO: *ILOI* AS A CASE STUDY IN THE APPLICATION OF A PARTICIPATORY 'COLLAGE METHODOLOGY'

Abstract

Contemporary representations of Nigerian women in Italy result, as is often the case with black women, in the reproduction of stereotypical images such as those of refugees. The patronising view informing research of migrant communities hinders the development of an open and engaging dialogue with them. In this article, we discuss the ways in which the participatory multimedia exhibition *Iloi* challenges dominant ways of representation through its employment of a *collage methodology*. The exhibition was co-created by a collective formed by a group of Nigerian women based in Palermo, two international art professionals and three academic researchers based in the Netherlands. Collage, a process of knitting together experiences, objects, history and futures, reflects the complexity of human interactions. Thus, this article proposes the use of a performative and interactive methodology geared towards making migration research more inclusive and reflective.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her treatment of the 'migrant' in research, policy and public debate Bridget Anderson poses the poignant question: "If everybody moves, when does movement become migration, whose movement counts as migration and why?"[1]. If in the social sciences the word 'migrant' mainly refers to someone who perceives themselves (or is perceived) as out of place or racially othered, in the realm of political debate the 'migrant' is a person whose movement or presence is often considered a problem[2]. Public debate

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[1] B. Anderson, "New Directions in Migration Studies: Towards Methodological De-Nationalism", *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7 (2019): 1-13 (2). Accessed on March 24, 2022. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0140-8.
[2] *Ibid.*: 2.

around human mobility across the central Mediterranean route has long been prey to what Anderson defines as the ideologically charged lexicon of migration[3]. In the last decade, the Mediterranean's changing geopolitical landscapes have engendered a series of border-crossings labelled 'migration crisis'. As a result of this perceived humanitarian 'emergency', controversial policies have been activated across European borders. On the EU policy level, these reactive tendencies have resulted in the creation of a "funding regime" for academic and humanitarian initiatives departing from a common understanding of human movements as problematic[4].

In her treatment of Italian reception systems, Barbara Pinelli points to the ways in which the grammar of asylum protocols shapes the representational categories according to which black women on the move are understood. Border regimes are in fact "only willing to recognize refugees through preconceived ideas of salvation and as cultural, dehistorical subjects"[5]. The construction of this image of an "ideal victim" is rooted in colonial history and serves the exclusionary purposes of border policies by allowing for the rejection of subjectivities that deviate from this established norm[6]. Academic and artistic treatments of people on the move often contribute, in the case of black female subjects, to their embedment within the frame of reference of vulnerable victims worthy of asylum/salvation, not acknowledging their subjectivity. In this article, we approach humanitarian discourse through an interdisciplinary toolkit aimed at denaturalising the fixed "categories of culture, gender and women"[7]. Through tools borrowed from performative social sciences, anthropology and artistic research, we propose the idea of *collage.* As an interdisciplinary method of research, *collage* is aimed at displacing its objects of study and thus reconfiguring some of the humanitarian and disciplinary *postures* that affect migration research and policy. According to artist and researcher Kathleen Vaughan, the term "collage methodology" embraces both artistic work that engenders discussion and learning as well as a methodology within which multiple academic fields are juxtaposed with a particular attention to the position of practitioners[8]. Performative social sciences (PSS) are not new to the usage of the term *collage* in relation to qualitative research. According to Brian Roberts, the 20th century Avant Garde *collage* technique represents a valuable inspiration for current research, in that its interactive components challenge the linearity of research processes by troubling the positions occupied by respondents, audience and researchers[9]. Adopting from PSS the notion of "conducting research by exploring artistic practices" and from artistic research the idea of collage as a method, this paper hopes to make a small contribution to the effort of enlarging the boundaries of research advocated by performative approach-

[3] *Ibid.*: 3.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] B. Pinelli, "Death and Salvation of Refugee Women on European Borders: Race, Gender and Class of Bodies of Power", *Anthropology Today*, 37 (2021): 17-20 (20). Accessed March 24, 2022. https://doi-org.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12630.

[6] N. Christie, "The Ideal Victim", in *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, edited by E.A. Fattah, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986: 17-30.

[7] Pinelli, "Death and Salvation of Refugee Women on European Borders: Race, Gender and Class of Bodies of Power": 18.

[8] K. Vaughan, "Pieced Together: Collage as an Artist's Method for Interdisciplinary Research", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4 (2005): 27-52 (40). Accessed October 10, 2021. DOI: 10.1177/160940690500400103.

[9] B. Roberts, "Performative Social Science: A Consideration of Skills, Purpose and Context", *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9 (2008): 1-44 (4). http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802588.

es to the field of anthropology[10]. Tackling this shared aim of PSS from an approach stemming out of the fields of anthropology, artistic research, and migration studies, this paper argues for the use of *collage* as a method of *research-creation* to reconfigure the relations between researcher and subjects in migration scholarship through participatory exhibition making practices.

During June and July 2021, the authors of this paper were involved in the creation of *Iloi*, a participatory conceptual exhibition that took place in Palermo, Italy. The aim of the exhibition, partnered by the Centro Cooperazione SUD SUD, was that of problematising fixed categories and positions of power within migration research. Guided by the principle of *collage*, we proceeded to weave together our team's different experiences in the production of an experimental ethnographic fabric. Riddled with gaps, silences and pulled threads, *Iloi* represented a "moment of undisciplined, interdisciplinary flux" that engendered valuable understandings of the ambivalence of participation in both research and exhibition making practices[11].

2. ADDRESSING THE ORIGINS OF "PITIFUL" REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN

The perception of Nigerian migrant women in Europe, and in particular in Italy, is closely associated with the trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation[12]. Such perceptions are nourished by the stereotypical images of innocent and helpless women portrayed by journalists and artists[13]. According to Pinelli, these images are engendered in order to fulfil the needs of post-WWII humanitarian protocols. Identifying women and children as "ideal sufferers" in need of salvation enables the legitimization of humanitarian exceptionalism[14]. As a result, migrant women are directed towards internalising certain values and proper behaviours in order to construct their "ethical moral selves" as worthy of assistance[15]. These victimising representations of migrants direct agency away from them by making a spectacle of their experience. Taking the term spectacle to mean, in line with Guy Debord, the process of turning lived experiences into a representation, we once again identify a well-known problem in the power relations underpinning the staging of the spectacle of migration[16]. By mediating between migrant communities and Western observers, documentary photographers, academics, and employees of the humanitarian sector become directors of the experience turned spectacle, thus reducing migrant subjects to the subordinate role of performers of their own representation according to Western imagination. Offered the lead role within the larger

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[10] *Ibid.*, 4.

[11] W.B. Worthen, "Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance", in *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by H. Bial, London: Routledge, 2004: 10-25.

[12] A. Jedlowski, "Migration, Prostitution and the Representation of the Black Female Subject in Nigerian Video Films about Italy", *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 4, 1 (2016): 9-23.

[13] E. O'Brien, "Ideal Victims in Trafficking Awareness Campaigns", in *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy. Critical Criminological Perspectives*, edited by K. Carrington, M. Ball, E. O'Brien , J.M.Tauri, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 1-12. Last accessed October 17, 2021. DOI: https://doi-org.tilburguniversity.idm.oclc.org/10.1057/9781137008695_21.

[14] M. Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, University of California Press, 2011, 4-59.

[15] Pinelli, "Death and Salvation of Refugee Women on European Borders: Race, Gender and Class of Bodies of Power": 18.

[16] G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 10.

spectacle of migration, migrant women are staged as "icons of suffering", ahistorical and homogeneous[17].

Working at the intersection between journalism and art, documentary photography has long been contributing to the creation of such icons, understood as fixed representational categories. In relation to the specific case study of migrant Nigerian women, this paper takes the 2021 exhibition *Oriri* as a productive illustration of the relation between representational regimes and the politics of border-crossings. On June 26, 2021 the photo exhibition *Oriri* (spirits/nightmares in Bini Language, Nigeria) opened in Palermo. The project collected photographs of black Nigerian women captured from behind, from the side, or in dim light. The artistic staging of photographs incorporates migration as an object of its storytelling and provides the public with a perception of it as an experience whose character is nightmarish. As demonstrated by Pinelli's work on the gendered grammar of asylum policy, the willingness of migrant women to recount their experiences of violence is constituted as the currency requested to obtain entrance into receiving communities. Because, as observed by Fassin, *"gender torment and sexual harassment receive favorable attention, arouse sympathy, raise little questioning, and, ultimately, often benefit from a positive assessment"* migrant women are pushed to tailor their subjectivity to the needs and affordances or asylum applications[18]. Reproducing the images and experiences of women whose migration journey is marked by violence, *Oriri* contributes to disciplining migration according to the demands of humanitarian discourse.

According to both Chouliaraki and Boltanski, humanitarian interventions driven by the *observation* of suffering constitute the phenomenon known as "politics of pity"[19]. In this constellation, the emotional responses engendered by pity take on a political character by becoming a script that ascribes specific behavioural roles to the actors involved in the aforementioned enactment of migration as a spectacle. Building on the work of Hanna Arendt, Boltanski argues that pity produces a set of relations in which blame is directed towards perpetrators and appreciation granted to those perceived as victims[20]. This construction makes apparent two important issues of positioning: on the one hand, the fixity of categories that underpin the representational discourse surrounding migration studies, and on the other, the need for visible victims. In the context of migration discourses surrounding the issue of European border politics, we can recognise in the position of a dispenser of pity the observing western subject. The possibility of feeling pity towards another rests upon the collateral necessity of inhabiting a space different and more privileged than that occupied by the pitied. The subjectivity the West constitutes as its other, the less fortunate non-western asylum seeker, is thus actively produced by an inverted act of projection of Western European self-perception. The representational systems in which the West conceives of itself and its others are steeped in colonial heritage. Within them, Western Europe inhabits the spaces of safety, well being and security resulting in the production of an *other* that is automatically relegated to the spaces of wretchedness, violence and poverty. The idea of the *other* as a suffering subject produced by these representations, becomes, in turn, a canonical standard. The

[17] Pinelli, "Death and Salvation of Refugee Women on European Borders: Race, Gender and Class of Bodies of Power": 18.
[18] D. Fassin, "The Precarious Truth of Asylum", *Public Culture*, 25, 1, (2013): 39-63.
[19] L. Chouliaraki, "Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 2, (2010): 107-126.
[20] L. Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 3-15.

characterisation it produces turns into a script to be abided by all those considered as disadvantaged. Underpinning this unspoken demand are Ticktin's observations on the expectation of "true suffering" as embodied by, and limited to, purity and innocence[21]. The failure to comply with such a stereotype of the 'ideal sufferer' has both political and societal consequences[22].

A refusal to constitute themselves as hypervisible subjects, meaning transforming their private, confusing and disquieting lived experience into a spectacle of visible and understandable character, can bring migrants to be pushed back at the border[23]. This experience, according to the research on Italian reception centres carried out by Pinelli, appears to be highly coded along the lines of class, race and gender. In particular, this last marker seems to be pivotal in structuring migrants' experience of humanitarian aid: because of the parameters set out by the political construct of migrant subjectivities as beneficiaries of Western pity, women and children become ideal sufferers. Their perceived, or constructed, purity generates a legitimisation ground for humanitarian exceptionalism enacted at the border: although everyone deserves help, the scarcity of resources makes it necessary to define parameters able to produce stable categories and define *more deserving* subjects.

The result is a "humanitarian posture" according to which black women with a history of trafficking are understood as affected by a lack of proper (aka Western) conceptions of liberty and justice[24]. In assuming the lack of these moral values, humanitarian personnel justifies its attempts at disciplining them into 'deserving refugee women' and simultaneously denies their agency as subjects by failing to acknowledge the ways in which the women may already conceive of themselves.

A practical example in this respect, is Literat's study on the production of selfies by refugees. In it, the author demonstrates that this form of self-presentation on behalf of refugees engendered negative reactions among Western observers (e.g., on social media). The image of the refugee with which the users whose selfies were observed in the study failed to align, was a product of the visual canon of suffering outlined above. In Literat's investigation, observers struggled to accept the refugees' freedom to represent themselves differently than as victims[25]. In the context of black women on the move, the display of suffering in the name of public awareness constructs and nourishes their stereotypical image as victims – of sexual exploitation, of their 'outdated belief systems', or of their migration journey[26]. When failing to portray themselves in accordance with these images of the innocent, the hurt and the feminine, they are denied entrance in what Benedict Anderson would identify as the receiving country's *imagined community*[27].

Thus, successful integration of migrant women in their receiving polities is often conditional upon their willingness to accept Western misrepresentations of themselves as perpetual victims. This acceptance entails the wavering of what Éduard Glissant de-

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[21] M. Ticktin, "A World without Innocence", *American Ethnologist*, 44, 4 (2017): 577-590. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12558.

[22] Christie, "The Ideal Victim": 17-30.

[23] Pinelli, "Death and Salvation of Refugee Women on European Borders: Race, Gender and Class of Bodies of Power": 18.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] I. Literat, "Refugee Selfies and the (Self)Representation of Disenfranchised Social Groups", *Media Fields Journal*, 12 (2017): 1-9.

[26] L.P. Beutin, "Black Suffering for/from Anti-Trafficking Advocacy", *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 9 (2017): 14-30.

[27] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, New York: Verso Books, 2006, 6.

scribes as a fundamental human right: the right to opacity[28]. The idea of a right to opacity stands for that right to not be transparent, apprehensible and clearly categorizable by the gaze of another. At the intersection of border politics and the migration spectacle, the right to opacity comes to define the rarely respected right to not expose one's personal experience of violence in order to obtain humanitarian assistance. The representational economy that constitutes migrant black women as pitiful subjects is thus produced by a cyclical movement across three distinct poles: academic discourse in migration studies, artistic treatments mediating public discourse and ultimately, asylum guidelines shaping international protocols. The pitiful representation of black migrant women produced by this cycle indirectly obstructs the path towards integration. Refusing the imperative to identify and behave as 'good victims', those who demand the freedom of representing themselves as attractive, independent, strong women are denied assistance and excluded from the repository of hypervisible subjects interrogated in the making of new policies that structure future humanitarian aid. As a result of this imperative to "become 'other' to belong", those who own the freedom to represent themselves are pushed to the fringes of local societies[29]. Consciously or unconsciously, academic researchers partake in the construction of victimising images reflecting these *politics of pity*. Having good intentions, we often assume that traumatic experiences should be studied and that they should be studied *by us*[30].

3. DISPLACING OBJECTS: TOWARDS THE PRACTICE OF COLLAGE METHODOLOGY

Because of its aims and the commitments entailed by its funding, migration research often culminates in directing agency away from the very communities it wishes to help[31]. Developing this critique a step further, Stierl dwells on the increasing intimacy between migration policy and migration studies scholarship. The demand for new solutions to the perceived problems caused by migration across European borders becomes a reason to fund the work of scholars working in migration studies. This causal relationship, however, often produces a 'harmful' cycle of knowledge production[32]. As cleverly explained by Garelli and Tazzoli, the harm done by migration research can be identified in its *disciplinary posture* by which, as scholars, "instead of making the discipline of migration studies we are disciplining the field"[33]. In this optic, the demands of migration scholarship and policy come to shape the field they should instead be *informed by*. The possibility for research to become the source of harm is thus actualised as a reality: it is research that directs its object to shape itself so as to fall into a specific, already fixed, representational category. Following Stierl, in order to remain valuable, studies surrounding migration must depart from an ethical consideration of their impact and understand the possibility of doing harm as a rarely avoidable reality[34].

[28] E. Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, 209.
[29] S. Hall, "Un-Settling 'the Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation: Whose Heritage?", *Third Text*, 13 (1999): 3-13 (13). Accessed October 22, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/09528829908576818.
[30] H. Cabot, "The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee Regime", *American Ethnologist*, 46, 3 (2019): 261-275.
[31] *Ibid.*, 275.
[32] M. Stierl, "Do No Harm? The Impact of Policy on Migration Scholarship", *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 2020: 1-2.
[33] G. Garelli, M. Tazzioli, "Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, an Introduction", *Postcolonial Studies*, 16, 3 (2013): 245-249. DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2013.850041.
[34] Stierl, "Do No Harm? The Impact of Policy on Migration Scholarship", 16.

Keeping this in mind, we began to engage in a dialogue with the community from a careful consideration of our position as researchers-artists. Making efforts to acknowledge the inequalities inherent to our positions and attempting to co-produce knowledge rather than extract it, became important guidelines in the creation of the *Iloi* as a participatory exhibition. The making of *Iloi* therefore stemmed from the need to devise a method of research able to remain vigilant and reflexive, questioning the field of anthropology and the anthropologist's position with it. Finding important inspiration in the methods of the performative social sciences (PSS), the doctoral research that had formed *Iloi*'s back bone began to move towards the field of artistic research with the writing of a project for a participatory exhibition. The idea of organising an exhibition and therefore treating the research as an event came from the wish to develop a relationship between *Iloi*'s various participants whose character could be performative and fluid[35]. From the very beginning of *Iloi,* participatory exhibition making was thus conscripted in the hope of "engaging reflexivity" through a method underpinned by artistic, ethnographic and performative practices[36]. Bringing participants on board, we hoped, could become a way to change the previously scripted dynamics of interaction between the community and Shaidrova as occupying, respectively, the positions of objects of study and artist-researcher. The practical make-up of this 'bringing on board', however, would only attain a clear meaning *in making*. The basic underpinnings of organising an event together with the participants entailed in fact a long period of negotiations surrounding *Iloi'*s character: the idea of an exhibition was initially received without enthusiasm, or interest. What Shaidrova had proposed to the respondents was to work together on the making of an exhibition within which both participants and researcher could talk, on their own terms, about their experience of each other. However, it remained unclear whether the participants had any real interest in this project. Because the power relations that had structured their communication until then were rigidly underpinned by the *disciplinary posture* of ethnographic research, Shaidrova felt unable to understand whether the participants were agreeing out of a real wish to participate, or if their assent was a way to comply with a perceived obligation voiced by her request. This ambivalence of purpose, which we began to identify as a fundamental ambivalence of participation, meant that we began to question, as a team, the purpose of our endeavour. What, and *who,* was *Iloi* for? As questions like this hung above the construction of the physical grounds of the exhibition, we noticed that the participants' position had undergone change. The preparation of the exhibition naturally began to incorporate the preparation of an opening event. In seeing this and being consulted about ideas and wishes for the opening event, the participants started to engage differently with the curatorial team: they became more outspoken and present on the grounds of the exhibition. This changing of hearts brought us to realise that up until that moment our communication with the participants around the performative element of the exhibition had taken place within the wrong frame of reference. The cadre of 'exhibition' as a commonly understood Western event meant little to nothing for the participants. However, once it became clear that the exhibition would also entail a party, the interest for the party, its organisation and possible components completely obscured all other topics of engagement.

In witnessing the change of dynamics realised by the participant's interest in the party and its organisation we were faced by some important theoretical questions. How

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[35] R. Gillian, "On the Relation between 'Visual Research Methods' and Contemporary Visual Culture", *The Sociological Review*, 62, 1 (2014): 24-46.
[36] Cabot, "The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee regime": 275.

to account for the simultaneous relevance of these two frames of reference? The ambivalence of participation became, in this sense, a lense through which *Iloi* may be understood as a process of *research-creatio*n: an approach to collaborative exhibition making aimed at incorporating different modes of knowing and knowledge systems within a construction that embraces ambivalence[37]. Although fights seemed to erupt on a daily basis, both among the participants and within the curatorial team, things also managed to fall back together, albeit in varying degrees of dissonance. The question of food for example (what food should be served during the exhibition, by whom it should be prepared, how, when, and in which culinary tradition) was a major point of conflict a few days before the exhibition's opening. Our first discussion of food became in fact a serious problem. This element, which the curatorial team had barely considered, emerged as having utmost importance according to the Nigerian collaborators of *Iloi*. It became clear that without food, there could be no 'party' worthy of this name. In discussing the practical implementation of catering with the participants, a multitude of relations started to come undone which had hitherto remained hidden within the larger dynamics of *Iloi* as a group. Shattering our naive ideas of collaborative exhibition making, the power relations entailed by traditional party preparations within Palermo's Nigerian community restructured *Iloi*'s group dynamics. It became clear that albeit presenting as a united front in their collaboration with the curatorial team, the participants' experience of making *Iloi* as a 'collaborative' process had been very different. The preparation of food entailed a specific position within the participants' understanding of 'party' as a celebration and a performance of status and power. This condition, of which the curatorial team had remained unaware until that moment, forced us to change the way in which we perceived ourselves and the participants performing the roles of collaborators in *Iloi*. Although collaborating with each other, the process of exhibition making had obviously entailed a degree of power imbalance: there was discontent. Some participants felt hurt, others, annoyed. Playing out with the larger scheme of relations identified by Tony Bennet's in his treatment of "the exhibitionary complex", the imbalances of power highlighted by the dispute over food had been an integral part of *Iloi* as a participatory process[38]. In acknowledging them and tending to what could be resolved, we also understood that some conflicts may not attain resolution. Collaboration is a very human process. Conflict, as one of the major drivers of human relations, is a prerequisite of agency: without conflict, it is impossible to have our opinion be heard in a condition of dissonance.

What had caused the issue of food to attain such importance within the making of *Iloi* was the impossibility to truly translate each other's attachments to specific word/concepts: 'exhibition' and 'party'. This conflict of meaning could not be resolved: attempting to do so would have only denatured the terms in the hope of some form of compromise. Different experiences of *Iloi* ended up simply layering on top of each other. Being simultaneously understood according to multiple systems of reference, the different experiences of *Iloi* came together in a mode akin to *collage*. According to Roberts, *collage* is an attractive method for PSS practices because it challenges the boundaries of research by troubling the traditional positions of researcher, participants and audience[39]. The linearity of relations prescribed by research through its immanent power structure, in which knowledge is extracted from the participants' lived experi-

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[37] *Ibid.*: 32.
[38] T. Bennet, *The Documenta 14 Reader*, Munich: Prestel, 356.
[39] Roberts, "Performative Social Science: A Consideration of Skills, Purpose and Context", 3.

ence and subsequently mediated, in a process beyond their immediate influence, by the researcher, is fundamentally altered in *collage*. Within this method for interdisciplinary research, the 'performative' element is inherent to the relations it produces: the researcher performs themselves and their position differently, which in turn produces a difference of engagement with participants. In the interdisciplinary constellation that *collage* represents as a PSS method, each discipline provides a different set of tools and none of them is prevalent: rather, each tool and theoretical lense set allows itself to be overshadowed on one side, only to take up more space later.

Understanding the extent to which we had been 'doing harm' in *Iloi* meant acknowledging the ways in which our positions of power within the exhibitionary complex had resulted in the taking up of a specific *disciplinary posture*. As described by Garelli and Tazzoli, the curatorial position of power which we occupied had brought us to "discipline" the field of our research: in realising we had tainted our own ideals surrounding the process of participatory exhibition making, we were faced by the imperative of embracing a different conception of the latter. Having constantly witnessed varying degrees of ambivalence in our relations with participants and each other, we began to understand participation as an inherently ambivalent endeavour. Respecting the different subjectivities and experiences coalescing into *Iloi* as an exhibition making process thus required us to become comfortable with the practice of embracing ambivalence. Relinquishing the idea that we could engage in any participatory process while 'doing no harm', we began looking for a different method to understand our position as researchers and collaborators. It had become clear, during the process of making *Iloi,* that what was really valuable among the many things being produced under the exhibition's scope, was in fact the mode of producing them. The act of coming together – be it in dialogue, silence, conflict or agreement, attested to a willingness to be *there.* Precisely in virtue of their ambivalence, the dynamics engendered by participation ensured that *Iloi*'s creation process remained in a state of constant reconfiguration, thus becoming itself the subject of research.

4. *ILOI*: THE ROLE OF COLLAGE IN RESEARCH-CREATION

With her usage of the term *research-creation*, which represents one of her most fundamental contributions to the fields of artistic research and contemporary social art practice, Stephanie Springgay refers to events "that are both sites to problematize research and a means to work with different publics around the knowledge flowing through the research event"[40]. Recognising in *Iloi*'s outcomes and modalities the character of a research event in line with Springgay's definition of *research-creation*, we began to lean on the scholarship provided by the fields of performative social sciences (PSS) and artistic research to expand the boundaries of anthropological research that had previously underpinned the exhibition's inception. Finding interesting precedents in Pinelli's work on "the ways the images of these women [black refugee women in Sicily] stifles a recognition of their political subjectivity" we wondered how the context of an exhibition space constructed through participatory methods could problematise our own research into the representational categories assigned to black refugee women. Hoping to engen-

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[40] S. Springgay, "On the Need for Methods beyond Proceduralism: Speculative Middles, (In) Tensions, and Response-Ability in Research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24, 3 (2018): 203-214 (212). https://1d0o.i.1o1 rg7/71/01.101778/10074718070704014747604464.

der direct and indirect collaborative processes, we thus set out to create *Iloi* as a physical space and a research event aimed at the self-reflective production of knowledge *on* and *of* itself.

With respects to what concerns the element of 'the performative' in interdisciplinary *research-creation* processes, the search for conceptual tools that problematize the different angles entailed by ethnographic research has a long genealogy. According to Roberts, this 'performative turn' in which performance and its study come to supply to PSS the majority of its tools, should be considered as dating back to Burke's treatment, in the 1940s and 50s, of the element of drama in social relations[41]. In our borrowing from PSS to construct a methodological framework able to aid our understanding of *Iloi* as an event of *research-creation,* we privileged the interdisciplinary application of the technique of *collage* which Roberts considers as a tool to challenge "the linearity of the research" and its dissemination processes[42]. In stretching this consideration of *collage* from a simple tool for PSS research to the funding frame of our entire methodology, we hoped to produce a methodological framework within which displaced objects (meaning different methods of looking, positioning and creating) are taken as equally valuable sources of knowledge. This initial displacement, which layers theoretical tools of different academic origins, embraces tension as immanent to the methods of anthropological research. Born in 1912 as an innovative artistic practice, the notion of *collage* began to be scholarly appreciated, after 1989, as a "knowledge practice" of revolutionary value[43]. In its various applications as a method of research in the fields of artistic research and performative social sciences, *collage* still maintains some direct ties with its original practice as an artform: within the frame of *collage,* objects are displaced with the precise aim of creating a feeling of "strangeness", which is in turn responsible for generating reflection in the audience[44]. When applied to academic knowledge, *collage* comes to stand for a methodology that "deliberately incorporates non dominant modes of knowing and knowledge systems" while embracing its inherent inability of translating from one system to another[45]. An interesting example of the interdisciplinary value of *collage* as a research method is Monica Kostera's work in the field of organisational studies. Applying the method of *collage* to storytelling techniques in the field of management, Kostera enriches the PSS understanding of this methodological tool by showing how performances are constantly evolving: in her work 'the story' emerges as a "living performative" – a constantly evolving event in the process of becoming[46].

In line with this understanding, we thus refer to *Iloi* as an artistic 'event' in the hope that this term may simultaneously account for both its process of creation, as well as the context of its display[47]. Composed of nine works of conceptual art and an evening of live performance, the exhibition was created over a period of one year. The works, some of which were co-created *in situ* through participatory practices, while others were otherwise produced by the artists/participants of *Iloi*'s collective, thus represented an instance of collaborative *research-creation.*

The extent of the collaborative character that produced the works constituting *Iloi* was different in the case of each work. An example of varying degree in which col-

[41] Roberts, "Performative Social Science: A Consideration of Skills, Purpose and Context", 5.
[42] *Ibid.,* 4.
[43] Vaughan, "Pieced Together", 31.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] *Ibid*., 32.
[46] M. Kostera,"The Narrative Collage as Research method", *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 2, 2 (2006): 22.
[47] Gillian. "On the Relation between 'Visual Research Methods' and Contemporary Visual Culture", 25.

laboration took place in the context of the actual creation of artworks is the process that brought to the mixed technique collage titled *Follow me*. This work, which had stemmed from an idea of Shaidrova and on which the artist/researcher had begun to work by herself, became a collaborative piece right before being moved into the exhibition's spaces. Reflecting on questions surrounding migratory movements and experiences of migration connected to sea faring, Shaidrova produced the image of a boat in mixed technique and glued it to a white canvas. Her initial idea was to step on the canvas with her footprints, an action in which she asked the participants to join her. Considering this request, the participants decided not to join Shaidrova's initial idea of placing their footsteps as walking away from the boat. Instead, they welcomed the empty space that had been left on the canvas and proceeded to handwrite their favourite motivational quotes on it. For example:

> *Keep walking, don't look at your feet, don't look back, just walk.*

Instead of complying with Shaidrova's request to place their feet on the canvas as if walking away from a boat, the participants altered the canvas according to their own wishes, a moment that became pivotal in our coming to understand *Iloi* as a process of *research-creation*. Through their artistic contribution to the exhibition, the participants had enriched the knowledge of migration experiences *Iloi* yielded, while still maintaining a strong subjectivity and protecting their right to opacity. The spectacle of migration journeys across the Mediterranean sea route often relies upon a specific script according to which the harshness of the journey puts moving subjects in peril. In this staging of the migration experience of refugees landing on Sicilian soil, the descent from the boat takes up a mythic character of salvation. In choosing to not dwell on these memories, or making the experience of their journey to Sicily a relevant part of their preferred storytelling, the participants demonstrated the importance of choosing what about themselves should be communicated within *Iloi*, how and *by whom*. Through the process of their coming into being and the fluxus of knowledge engendered by their display, the artworks thus became an integral part of the research process that had brought Shaidrova to turn her migration studies doctoral research into an exhibition. The eight Nigerian women who joined *Iloi*'s collective, not all of them wishing us to disclose their names, did so in the roles of participants and colleagues. Albeit more fluid than the rigid positions of respondents they occupied in Shaidrova's PhD research, the roles of the women within *Iloi*'s exhibitionary complex continued to be problematic. The hierarchy of power inherent to exhibitionary complexes remained in fact a powerful element in the making of *Iloi,* engendering miscommunications on a vast scale. The authority embodied by the curatorial team remained, despite the participatory character of the exhibition making process, a clear limitation to the interaction between *Iloi*'s members. Being accustomed to performing a certain image of themselves for the benefit of the scholars and humanitarian personnel that had directed them towards Iloi, the participants struggled to trust the curatorial team. Despite seeming to have understood that *Iloi* did not demand them to perform a subjectivity in line with the pitiful repertoire of black female refugee subjects, some participants still seemed to maintain, up until the very day of *Iloi*'s opening, a logical degree of mistrust towards the curatorial team's plan – as we argued above in our treatment of the humanitarian and disciplinary postures, this condition was likely to be funded in their experiences of Italy's reception apparatus. An example of this being the case of a participant who had been thoroughly involved in the performance's making: they designed their own performance clothes, went to several fitting appointments,

showed up to the opening night adorned in traditional Bini beads, and yet, at the very last minute, expressed a wish not to take part in the choreography they had been rehearsing with the others. Surprisingly, after witnessing the others perform, the same participant walked up to the curatorial team and asked to have the DJ play one more song, so that they may also exhibit their dance choreography. It is obviously impossible for us to make any conclusion as to whether the participant's decision to perform was motivated by a resolution of their mistrust towards us as collaborators, or simply by a wish to celebrate the moment together with the others. Since the present survey of *Iloi* is limited to the preparation that lead to the exhibition event and the period during which *Iloi* was open to the public, we cannot make informed guesses about the participants' reflections on this experience. All we know about the way they conceived of their participation was what they told us in conversation, or shared with the public of *Iloi* during their speeches on opening night. As a result, this article may not be read as an accurate transcript of all the different experiences that resulted in *Iloi*'s ethnographic fabric, nor would it wish to attain such an aim. Rather, we believe that the value of this work should be found in its survey of *Iloi* as an event that employed the practical application of *collage* as a method for *research-creation*.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, we discussed the significance of weaving together theoretical tools borrowed from the disciplines of artistic research, ethnography and performative social sciences into an interdisciplinary framework we refer to as *collage methodology*. Through the analysis outlined above, we presented *Iloi* as a process of *research-creation* through which participatory exhibition practice meets ethnographic and artistic research in the creation of an event of methodological significance. Our article began with a chapter surveying the representational challenges faced by black migrant women in the context of migration research and political discourse. Outlining the ways in which migrant women are requested to perform the roles of victims and suffering subjects, we introduced the dimension of border policy and asylum protocols into our problematising of the representational regime according to which the spectacle of migration is constructed. We then continued by outlining the ways in which such challenges are reconducible to the idea of a *politics of pity,* with a particular focus on how this produced black refugee women as pitiful subjects. This paragraph resulted in an examination of the ways in which academic research in the field of migration studies reflects this attitude and directly contributes to harming the communities it prefixes itself to help by reinforcing these images of ideal suffering. Problematising such a state of affairs and the ways in which migration scholarship disciplines the field and engenders a state of hypervisibility, we built our argument for the necessity of participatory exhibition making practices on the basis of Glissant's call for everyone's right to opacity and self-expression. Surveying different examples of research on the (self-)representation of migrant subjectivities, we demonstrated that retaining the right to ambivalence represents an important stake in the maintenance of agency over one's self-representation.

Building extensively on the work of Barbara Pinelli, the article analysed *Iloi*'s method for *research-creation* according to its ability to denaturalise what Pinelli identifies as the main fixed categories underpinning the representational regime of migration: race, class and gender. Taking as a guiding principle the idea of prefixed postures identified by Pinelli and Garelli and Tazzioli, who describe, respectively, a humanitarian

and disciplinary posture, we proceeded to reflect upon the practical process of making *Iloi*. Our analysis of the exhibition making process highlighted the ways in which the ambivalence of participation that characterised *Iloi* helped in bringing to the fore issues relating to self-performativity and representational agency[48]. Through a method of *re-search-creation* funded upon the use of *collage* as a tool for PSS practice, we observed a significant degree of interactivity in the power relations inherent to the exhibitionary complex and researcher/respondent relations. The expansion of *collage* from a tool of artistic research and performative social sciences to the funding element of an inter-disciplinary methodology engendered acts of border crossing in the context of *Iloi*'s academic and artistic practice. Working towards this goal, our efforts in creating *Iloi*'s physical display were thus geared towards designing a space where stories could collect, circulate and contaminate one another. The extent to which this aim could be realised and with what outcomes was the object of our project of *research-creation*.

Creating and displaying *Iloi* as a participatory collaborative exhibition was a process characterised, for better and for worse, by a state of fluidity. As reminded us by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, "Humans do not simply adapt to systems. They shape them"[49]. It is precisely in this subversive manifestation of humanity, conceived as the ability of crossing and redefining boundaries, that the authors of this article locate the biggest treasure of the event constituted by *Iloi*. We thus believe our research to have made a convincing argument for the need of epistemologies that simultaneously value the layered knowledge production yielded by multiple systems of meaning-making. In the midst of an ever changing flux of power dynamics, role playing and interpersonal exchange, *Iloi* testified to the value of all that which in research remains unscripted, untranslatable and unfinished[50].

[48] Garelli, Tazzioli, "Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, an Introduction": 224.
[49] *Ibid.*: 7.
[50] *Ibid.*: XVIII.