



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Ambivalent Im/mobilities: Rethinking South Asian Migrations to Italy Through and Beyond Queerness

Faculty of Humanities and Philosophy
Department Italian Institute of Oriental Studies
PhD in Civilizations of Asia and Africa

Valeria Infantino
1746618

Supervisor
Mara Matta

Co-supervisor
Aditya Bharadwaj

A.Y. 2025-2026

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / RINGRAZIAMENTI

This thesis would not exist if a number of people did not consent to entrust me, a complete stranger, with the stories of their lives. The openness, kindness, profundity, and generosity that they invested me with, over the last three years, I am not able to put into words. To A., J., A., and M., especially, goes my most heartfelt, forever gratitude. Talking, walking and eating with you, getting a glimpse of your thoughts and lives, listening to your hopes and dreams, and getting to write about it all was a gift.

Similarly, a significant portion of this work would not have been possible had it not been for Alessandra and Antonella, who decided to trust my project before I could even trust it myself. Thank you for replying to my email, and for letting me into the wonderful, painstaking work that you do.

Throughout the conduction of this research – well before that, in fact –, I got to be guided by brilliant professors, who also happen to be wonderful human beings. I want to thank Marianna Ferrara, for pushing me to attempt this PhD journey, and for being there when I needed it the most. Aditya Bharadwaj, for challenging me to think more and think better, and for three wonderful months in Geneva. Mara Matta, for teaching me everything that I know.

The attentive comments, suggestions, and feedback of two external readers immensely helped this thesis get in its final – hopefully better – shape. I am grateful to Gianluca Gatta and Habibul Haque Khondker for dedicating their time and attention to this work.

I first entered Sapienza's 'Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali' in October 2016 as an unaware, confused not-yet 19-year-old. Since then, I have likely spent more time in its classrooms, library, café, and offices, than in my own house. I am thankful to the professors I got to learn from all throughout my Bachelor, Master, and PhD, and to the administrative personnel and facilities staff who, with their work, make studying and teaching and thinking materially possible for us, every single day. Most of all, I am grateful for having been given the opportunity and privilege to make studying my fulltime job for three years.

A huge شکریہ to Riya, for being an amazing teacher, and a friend. Thank you for making me rediscover what is there to love in Hindi and Urdu, and for reminding me every week.

Grazie a Martina, Melissa e Mirko, perché abbiamo fatto questo viaggio insieme. A Lidia, che odia i ringraziamenti. A Ludovica, Randa e Valeria, perché senza di voi non esisto. A Francesca, perché siamo state una la *mastermind* dell'altra. A Giulia, per aver scelto di condividere la sua amicizia con me tanti anni fa e non aver più cambiato idea.

Grazie soprattutto a Leo, mamma, e papà, a cui riservo la parte peggiore di me ma che, nonostante tutto, continuano a tenere in vita ed espandere il mio orizzonte del possibile.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. Recharting South Asian Migrations to Italy: Beyond the Sexless Straight Migrant.....	5
II. Queer Migrations to Italy: The Missing Geography of an Emerging Field.....	14
III. Negotiating ‘Queerness’ in South Asia: A Very Brief Outline	21
IV. Conclusion-Beginning: Towards an Area-Sensitive Reading of ‘Queer’ South Asian Ambivalent Im/mobilities to Italy	28
CHAPTER ONE: ETHNOGRAPHIC MOVEMENTS AND MOORINGS	32
1.1. Prelude.....	32
1.2. Constructing the Field(s): Fieldwork Configuration	35
1.3. Constructing the Field(s): Methodologies	46
1.3.1. Making the Most of the Impossibility of Immersion.....	47
1.3.2. Doing it Away with the Interview and the Recorder: Conducting Research through Informal Conversations.....	49
1.3.3. Participant-Centered Methodologies	57
1.4. Conclusions: A Paradox of Im/mobility	59
CHAPTER TWO: GESTURING.....	66
2.1. Introduction: Bodily Movements as the Trans- <i>Loc</i> i of ‘Queerness’	66
2.2. Sam. A Pinky Finger Gave You Away? Re-Constituting Discourses of Maleness and Gayness Across South Asia and Italy.....	70
2.2.1. Man? Khusra? Gay? Of Readings and Misreadings.....	79
2.2.2. A Parenthesis: There’s Life Beyond Disavowal	87
2.2.3. Coming Out, but Doing It Backwards: Circular Resignifications of Sexual Defiance in Migration	101
2.3. Atif. Hijra-Clapping in a Pigneto Queer Bar: Staging Gender Defiance with an Accent	110
2.3.1. Dancing One’s Way through Migration: Dis/Placing Mujra Transnationally	122
2.3.4. Coda. Un-Staging Muñoz’s <i>Stages</i> : For an Appreciation of Presentness.....	139
CHAPTER THREE: WALKING	145

3.1. Introduction. Walking, Stopping, Then Walking Again	145
3.2. Im/mobility as Theme: Moving, After Migration	148
3.2.1. Italy's <i>Accoglienza</i> : A Brief Overview	152
3.2.2. Leaving <i>Accoglienza</i> Behind: Refugees' Desires Against the Grain.....	158
3.2.3. Additional Nuances of Refugeeness: Stretching Migration Categories from Within...	170
3.3. Im/mobility as Method: Moving Together through the City	179
3.3.1. Phenomenology of a Fried-Chicken Shop, or: When Place Becomes a Research Tool	180
3.3.2. Of Window-Shopping Sprees, Allusive Glances, and Fantasies of Domesticity: Normal Attachments in Migration and the Limits of 'Queer'	187
CHAPTER FOUR: MIGRATING.....	201
4.1. Introduction, I. Migration, At Last	201
4.2. Introduction, II. <i>Everything But</i> Queer Migration: Moving towards the Good Life, Perhaps	202
4.2.1. Bringing Sexuality at the Center of Migration Studies: A Brief Historical and Theoretical Overview.....	205
4.2.2. Moving Sexuality Aside: Proposing Alternative Lenses to Look at Sexual Migrations from South Asia to Italy.....	214
4.3. Shanto. Photography without Images Calls for Imagination, Migration without the Good Life Calls for Optimism, or: Six Photos that I Cannot Show You, and Something More	221
4.3.1. A Small Experiment: Visual Ethnography Minus the Images	223
4.3.1.1. Six Photos that I Cannot Show You.....	227
4.3.2. Absences Can Be Presences, too: Photographing a Journey of Sexual Migration from Bangladesh to Italy	229
4.3.2.1. "Dhaka is the city that made me who I am": Understanding the Broader Arc of Shanto's Migration Trajectory.....	237
4.3.3. The Visual Fabric of Shanto's 'Better Life': Cinephilia as Futurity.....	246
4.3.4. Visual Subtraction as a Kinder Iteration of Optimism.....	252
4.4. Muneeb. Yet Another Case for Cruel Optimism? Migration as Wanting What One Already Has	260

4.4.1. From Student to Migrant: Retracing Muneeb's Path into Italian Im/mobility	262
4.4.2. Getting Stuck while Reaching for the Sky: Cosmopolitan South Asian Youth and the Italian Scam	270
4.4.3. Coda. Thinking and Rethinking Returns	279
CONCLUSIONS	283
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	293

I want what we have
A beautiful life
But the stillness
The stillness might eat me alive
– Lucy Dacus, *Limerence*

Even when you get what you want, you can't have what you want
– Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

INTRODUCTION

This research was initially conceived as an exploration of a specific and particularly neglected subset of mobility among contemporary South-North transnational migration trajectories: the one comprised by the relocation from the South Asian region to Italy¹ of people whose gender and/or sexuality would defy, to whatever extent and in whatever modality, expectations of heterosexuality and heteronormativity – from now on: sexually/gender defiant people, or, more straightforwardly, ‘queer’ people². This research started off, in other words, as a work thematically delimited only by the simultaneous copresence of the following three heuristic lenses: ‘South Asia’, ‘Italy’, and ‘queerness’. Not by one specific national, religious, or social group within South Asia; not by one specific ‘typology’ or ‘community’ of queer people; not even by one specific ‘category’ of migrants and people on the move. Given the total absence of earlier academic contributions systematically joining together South Asia with Italy with queerness, this initial broadness in scope was sought out and implemented deliberately: first and foremost, as a tool to ensure the doability itself of research; but also, as a heuristic, epistemological, and methodological strategy, mired at enhancing the capability of this project to remain attuned to all those issues – especially, though not exclusively, related to gender/sexuality – that seemed more likely to trespass national, linguistic, and identitarian borders, and develop, instead, along lines as diverse as, say, those of the region or the body. Given these premises, the goal of this study was never to reach a comprehensive understanding of something as broad – and, in a way, as fictitious – as ‘South Asian queerness in Italy’: of what such an assemblage is, looks like, or entails. Rather, it mired at opening up a few, hopefully meaningful, windows into a reality of migration that had been mostly ignored up until that point; and to do so, most importantly, via a subjectivity-centered approach to migration research (Mezzadra, 2001; 2004; see also Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, pp. 83-85; Fontanari, 2019; Garella and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2013b; Pinelli, 2017, pp. 11-15), rather than via a more classic sociological apprehension of migratory and diasporic phenomena respectively as ‘flows’ and ‘communities’, premised, in turn, upon the gathering of large-scale findings and aggregated data. The

¹ Even though I rely on the supranational lens of ‘South Asia’ as a heuristic for the present research, the people I have engaged with throughout fieldwork conduction reached Italy specifically from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and, to a much lesser extent, India. In fact, the four primary participants whose stories ended up constituting the core of the ethnographic component of this dissertation (see Chapters Two, Three, and Four), came originally from Pakistan and Bangladesh only. I will explain more in-depth the multiple rationales lying behind the choice to rely on a regional heuristic of ‘South Asia’, rather than on one rooted in the nation-state, later on in this Introduction.

² Throughout this thesis I will provisionally use ‘queer’ and ‘queerness’ between brackets as a shorthand formula to denote any possible instance of sexual and/or gender defiance of what is deemed ‘normal’ within frameworks of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. However, the viability of the concepts of queer and queerness themselves, together with the globalized yet not-necessarily-global understanding of gender and sexuality – of what constitutes one and what the other; of the boundaries between the two; as well as of the boundaries between hetero- and homosexuality, and between homosexuality and transness – will be among the main objects of critical analysis of this work. See further on in the work, Chapters 2.2.; 3.3.2.; 4.2.2.

present thesis thus represents the result of a patchwork-like fieldwork endeavor (Günel and Watanabe, 2023), conducted in more or less consistent, frequent, and extended space- and time-spans, over the course of two and half years, from January 2023 to March 2025, with some fragments of it extending well beyond that date, up until November 2025. A time during which I implemented a combined series of qualitative methods only – including participant observation, semi-structured and biographic interviews (Wengraf, 2001), going-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003), and talking whilst walking (Anderson, 2004; see also Ingold and Vergunst, 2008) – with a small and diverse group of research participants: mostly young ‘males’³ who had recently relocated from Pakistan or Bangladesh to different areas of Italy, for the most part via paths of SOGI asylum recognition (see Danisi et al., 2021; for a through discussion of research methodology, see further on in this thesis, Chapter One)⁴.

Given the fact that this research resulted from the combination of three coordinates that had not yet been addressed, together, in scientific literature, the first question around which it pivoted inevitably reflected the sense of vacuum that this newness entailed. As simple and as rhetorical as it may sound: are there sexually/gender defiant, lgbt+, and/or queer South Asian migrants in Italy? Even if I knew for a fact that there were, directly posing this question in straight terms was less banal then, than it may seem now, even if only in light of the difficulty that I was facing at the time in locating potential research interlocutors. The reactions I would be met with then – for instance, when trying to find a gatekeeper, or when informally discussing my work – would, in a way, confirm the relevance itself of the question. These ranged from the confused response I got from an Italian independent scholar who had extensively worked on queerness in South Asia before – roughly: “Oh, you mean *in Italy*? I thought you wanted to do research in India! In that case, no, I don’t know anyone...”; to the perplexity of friends and acquaintances, to whom I would often complain of my struggles in finding participants for the project – something along the lines of: “Well, actually I am surprised you even found two!”.

Once ascertained that queer South Asian migrants in Italy did, in fact, exist – and in numbers greater than two – my research questions shifted towards more compelling avenues of enquiry, profoundly shaped, in turn, by queer migration studies’ conceptualization of queer migration itself “as a [...] dynamic, two-way process, whereby the experience of migration can also influence sexuality – the way it is understood, performed and experienced – even if the stated motivation is not sexuality-

³ I am using quotation marks because, in some cases, maleness constituted a problematic assemblage from which to disidentify, more than a stable subjectivity marker.

⁴ As it will be clarified multiple times across this work, SOGI asylum stands to indicate claimants’ who apply for international protection on grounds of their Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity. For the most detailed overview on SOGI asylum in Italy to date, see Danisi et al., 2021.

related” (Mole, 2021, p. 3)⁵. From which the following questions, that structured the majority of fieldwork conduction: what strategies and discursive repertoires do sexually/gender-defiant South Asian migrants in Italy mobilize, in order to negotiate, articulate, or strategically withhold their queerness amid conflicting imperatives of in/visibility and intelligibility, and within homophobic, racist, orientalist, and nationalist formations operating throughout and beyond migration? How does queerness shape their migratory trajectories and their subsequent inhabitation of diasporic spaces? Conversely, how do migration regimes, diasporic social dynamics, and the everyday realities of Italian queer and non-queer sociality contribute to re/shaping how queerness is understood, lived, and expressed?

Ironically enough, however, the decisive turning point in pinning down the overarching, most generative research question for this project occurred when fieldwork conduction was already over, one April afternoon in Geneva, while sitting in my co-supervisor’s office inside one of the fancy petals of the *Institut de Hautes Études Internationales et du Développement*. As I attempted to articulate to him my newest working hypothesis – namely, that desire might constitute the very space of trouble capable of unsettling and collapsing rigid categories of migration management, a disruptive force exceeding neat distinctions between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’, ‘economic’ and ‘sexual’ migration (see Collins, 2018; see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Sections 3.2.2. and 3.2.3.) –, he suggested I look at my research fields from a different angle. What if, he proposed, people were in fact leaving behind those very spaces that offered them the maximum opportunity to act upon their ‘queer’ desires: i.e., their home contexts in South Asia, where certain forms of homoerotic and homosocial intimacy can easily find spatial and discursive pockets where to thrive? What if, in other words, migration did not necessarily express and expand the horizon of people’s desires, but, in certain cases, narrowed it? After all, desire itself is never innocent, but is rather traversed and shaped by hierarchies of value rooted in class, racialization, and citizenship status, just to name a few (see e.g., Srinivasan, 2022). From this perspective, then, migration to Europe – and to a notoriously ‘conservative’ country like Italy all the more so – would stop automatically providing a freer terrain for desire to unfold. If anything, it would intensify new forms of constraint, social and economic precarity, as well as racialization, that under the banner itself of ‘desire’ remain concealed. Another crucial research question, then, joined the others listed so far – a slightly provocative one, for sure, but generative all the more so: why would sexually/gender defiant people even want to leave South Asia behind in the first place,

⁵ Unless specified otherwise, all throughout this work, by employing the formula ‘queer migration’ – alternatively ‘sexual migration’ – I will imply the formulation proposed by Mole (2021). The latter, in turn, builds upon a rich, and much broader, academic movement which, with time, has coalesced under the rubric of ‘queer migration scholarship’, and which includes, among others, works by Lionel Cantú (2009), Hector Carrillo (2017), Eithne Luibhéid (2004; 2008), and Martin Manalansan IV (2003; 2006). For a more detailed overview of this field of scholarly enquiry, see further on in this thesis, Chapter Four, Section 4.2.1.

if South Asia itself holds for them larger potentials to pursue their own ‘queer’ desires? And what happens once they do? Two questions that, in turn, immediately called for the posing of another, strictly related query: is it even accurate to say that South Asia holds such larger possibilities in the first place? If so, for whom?

The present thesis constitutes an attempt at tackling all of the questions listed so far: sometimes thoroughly and directly, more often partially and obliquely, but always by approaching them through an attentiveness to the “irreducible singularity” (Mezzadra, 2001, ‘Introduzione, 2.’, my translation) of the subjective experiences of each individual participant. Crucially, this latter point does not entail relying on subjectivity as a force informing the actions of hyper-agentive individuals, who act freely and devoid of any of the impacts and consequences exerted on them by structures of either migration management, or trans/national lgbt+ identity formation. Quite the opposite, it is an approach grounded in a conception of subjectivity that moves between two interrelated dimensions: on the one hand, of the subject as both constituted and constrained by structural relations of power; on the other, of the subject as endowed with the capacity to exceed, rework, and potentially unsettle the very processes of subjectivation through which she has come into being (Casa-Cortes et al., 2015) – or, at least, to attempt to do so. Hence, even if the broadness of the research questions in and of themselves might lead one to think otherwise, this thesis will not provide answers equally applicable to every participant, let alone to the entirety of South Asian ‘queer’ migrants in Italy. Rather, each participant will provide an opening, an insight, or an interruption into the questions themselves: one that will prove valuable exactly in the individual limitedness of its applicability. Consequently, what this research will ultimately offer as ‘findings’ – but also, as insights potentially capable of resonating beyond the contingency of this research in and of itself – resides less in its contents and empirical materials, than in its broader methodological and epistemological posture: one that I am henceforth referring to as an area-sensitive reading of ‘queer’ South Asian migrations to Italy. With that, I am invoking a broader methodological and thematical sensibility to be deployed in migration research, so that the latter remains doubly attuned to both ‘area’ and ‘sexuality/queerness’, while also not losing focus of the broader global and local structures of migration management that allow some people to move, while hindering and/or slowing down others. A double-edged attunement, this one to both area and the realm of the sexual, that has rarely been embraced in Italian migration scholarship so far.

Indeed, this research emerges at the intersection of two bodies of literature that, while rich in and of themselves, have rarely spoken to one another: socio-anthropological studies of South Asian migrations and diasporas in Italy, on the one hand, and the growing multidisciplinary field of Italian queer migration studies, on the other. When apprehended in isolation, each of these fields can be seen to offer relevant insights into sets of contemporary mobilities to the Italian context, from two different

but equally valuable perspectives: area-specific, when it comes to the former; queerness/sexuality-centered, as for the latter. When read together, however, these two bodies of works reveal to be complicit in the production of a double-edged discursive effacement, that structures the way migrant subjects are made intelligible in academic discourse tout court. On the one hand, across literature on South Asian migrations to Italy, sexuality – ‘queerness’, all the more so – remains systematically marginalized, yet also coterminously subsumed within a pervasive horizon of heteronormativity, with the result that South Asian migrants emerge as a sexless, yet paradoxically also heterosexual, collectivity of people: removed from sexual subjectivity, yet simultaneously oriented towards an unquestioned horizon of heterosexuality and family normativity. Conversely, within Italian queer migration studies, sexuality is placed at the center of analysis, but often at the cost of detaching migrants themselves from both their situated personal histories, and the complexities of their broader contexts of departure – including those relating to the realms of queerness and gender/sexuality more broadly. In other words, queer migrants are frequently approached as if their ‘non-normative’ sexual/gendered selves emerge primarily in migration, shaped almost exclusively by encounters with asylum regimes, Italy’s reception institutions, and Italian LGBT+ milieus. People’s pre-migration lives, local vocabularies of desire and/or oppression, gendered/sexual formations, class positions, religious sentiments, and regionally-inflected individual and collective sensibilities, instead, tend to remain backgrounded, if not entirely erased, unless deployed to depict countries of origin as backward, invariably queerphobic, formations. Taken together, these two tendencies generate what can be conceptualized as a double-edged discursive and epistemological impasse, whereby ‘area’ comes about at the expenses of ‘queerness’, and ‘queerness’ at the expenses of ‘area’. It is precisely in a move to unpack how this composite effacement has come to determine the intelligibility of migrant subjects in Italian migration research, that the following sections will revisit these two bodies of literature side by side: not merely to summarize them, but rather to examine the epistemological assumptions through which ‘area’ and ‘queerness’ have been made to diverge.

I. Recharting South Asian Migrations to Italy: Beyond the Sexless Straight Migrant

In recent years, Asian nationals have consistently been making up for the largest group of non-EU residents in Italy, accounting for nearly one third of the country’s non-European population. Within this subsection of Italy’s migrant demographic, people from the South Asian region constitute the most substantial presence (approximately 16.3% of the total), with significant communities from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan – respectively the fifth, seventh, and ninth non-EU community for regular presences in the whole Italian territory –, shaping the social, economic, and cultural fabric of contemporary Italy in profound ways (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2024; Ministero del Lavoro

2023a; 2023b; 2023c). While small-scale foreign presence in Italy can be traced back already to the aftermaths of World War II, it is only from the 1990s that inward migration flows – including from the Indian subcontinent – begin to be registered as structurally significant in the country, amid a broader process of transformation that sees Italy going from being primarily a country of emigration, to one of significant immigration, too (Colucci, 2018). Attracted by Italy’s initial lax approach to inward flows of mobility – especially if compared to those concomitantly being adopted by other European countries like the U.K., Germany, and France – epitomized, in turn, by the frequent resorting to *sanatorie* (lit. ‘amnesties’) as an ex-post regularization tool (ibid.), South Asian nationals increasingly turn to Italy as their chosen destination country (see e.g., Priori, 2010)⁶. With time and the further development of phenomena of chain-migration, South Asian settlements in Italy begin to stabilize according to specific patterns of locality, that turn out to be not at all uniform across the peninsula. Instead, specific Italian regions – at times cities, or even single neighborhoods – end up becoming the preferred hubs for different collectivities from the Subcontinent: Rome becomes the main settlement ground for Bangladeshis, to the point that, today, Italy’s capital city hosts the biggest Bangladeshi community present in the European Union (Ministero del Lavoro, 2023a); the primarily agriculture-based areas of Northern, North-Eastern and Central Italy see the highest settlements of Indian communities, mainly from the state of Punjab (Ministero del Lavoro, 2023b); finally, the northern regions of Lombardy and, to a slightly lesser extent, Emilia Romagna become home to the most cohesive and populous Italy-based Pakistani groups (Ministero del Lavoro, 2023c).

As these communities consolidate and expand, it does not take long for them to start garnering sustained attention from the academic world, and soon enough a consistent body of socio-anthropological scholarship on South Asian migrations and diasporic formations in Italy begins to form – one very much alive and growing to this day. This corpus of works, although heterogenous in its interests, methods, and depth, can ultimately be seen to coalesce around a series of recurring thematic clusters, which consistently cut across different national groups, albeit with varying degrees of investigative intensity⁷. A first meaningful strand of scholarship focuses on histories of settlement and territorial concentration, reconstructing the emergence and consolidation of South Asian diasporic collectivities

⁶ Doubts have been recently raised on the linearity of this push-pull dynamics (see Colucci, 2018, pp. 69). However, literature retracing the earliest phases of South Asian, especially Bangladeshi, migrations to Italy (e.g., Priori), as well as the testimonies of selected participants (see e.g., Shanto’s case in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3., and Chapter Four, Section 4.3.), seem to confirm this narrative.

⁷ To ensure coherence with the rest of the work, here I will focus on Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani presence alone. Even though I did manage to engage with people with Indian origins throughout the course of fieldwork, they were far less numerous than Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, on whose stories of sexuality and/in migration this thesis has ultimately ended up focusing. Here in this introductory section, however, I will nonetheless engage the literature on Indian communities in Italy, too, as a way to provide a clear enough of idea of the background against which I started to move at the beginning of research conduction, when I still did not know what – and who – I would have found in front of me during fieldwork.

across specific Italian regions and cities. Studies on Bangladeshi presence in Rome (Bisio, 2013; Knights and King, 1998; Pompeo, 2011; Priori, 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2014) and on Punjabi Sikh settlements in Northern and Central Italy (Bertolani, 2005; Bertolani et al., 2011; Denti, Ferrari and Perocco, 2005; Ferraris, 2009), for instance, provide detailed accounts of migration chains, community infrastructures, and local incorporation processes. Broader historical reconstructions of migratory flows from India and Pakistan (Abenante, 2017; Bertolani, Rinaldini, and Tognetti Bordogna, 2013; Lum, 2012; Thapan, 2013) similarly situate these mobilities within longer trajectories of transnational movement, in which Italy is but one of several other actors. A second major thematic cluster deals with labor, transnational mobility, and citizenship regimes, with particular attention being given to migrants' insertion into Italian labor markets and their multi-sited trajectories of movement across Europe. This strand proves especially developed in relation to Bangladeshi migration, where scholars have examined migrants' economic strategies, remittance systems, legal precariousness, and the phenomenon of onward migration, notably to the U.K. (Della Puppa and King, 2018; Della Puppa and Sredanovic, 2017; King and Della Puppa, 2020; Knights, 1996; Morad and Gombač, 2015; Morad and Sacchetto, 2020; Morad, Della Puppa and Sacchetto, 2021; Priori, 2017; 2019; Priori, Mapril and Della Puppa, 2021; Roy and Verdun, 2019). Similar concerns with mobility patterns and incorporation also surface in studies on Pakistani migration, although much fewer in numbers (Artero and Chiodelli, 2020; Bonizzoni and Marzorati, 2015). Closely intertwined with these analyses are, moreover, investigations of family formations, marriage practices, and transnational generational dynamics, particularly within Bangladeshi and Punjabi Sikh contexts. Against this backdrop, available research explores how family relations structure economic transactions, shape migration projects, and reorganize gendered hierarchies across borders, meaningfully highlighting the centrality of family reunification, arranged marriage, and intergenerational negotiations in the diaspora, as well as the problems that to those associate (Della Puppa, 2018; Della Puppa and Ambrosini, 2022; Morad, 2021; Rahman and Kabir, 2012). Another substantial strand of literature addresses experiences of religion, identity construction, and racialization in migration, especially in relation to Punjabi Sikh collectivities. Here, several scholars turn to processes of religious boundary-making, identity negotiation, and the interplay between minority status and in/visibility (Bertolani, 2018; Bertolani and Boccagni, 2022; Ferraris and Sai, 2014; Gallo, 2012; Gallo and Sai, 2013; Thapan, 2015), as well as to experiences of racialization within the Italian context (Bonfanti, 2017b).

Besides the more 'classic' thematic clusters of migration research retraced above, this heterogeneous body of works also takes up other avenues of enquiry, that have traditionally constituted less-beaten paths for migration and diaspora studies. Gender, in particular, gets accorded a significant degree of attention across investigations of all the three main South Asia communities in Italy, as

testified by the interventions by Noemi Bisio (2013), Francesco Della Puppa (2014; 2018; 2019), and Mohammad Morad and Jure Gombač (2015; 2018), for Bangladesh; by Barbara Bertolani (2020), Sara Bonfanti (2015; 2016; 2019), Ester Gallo (2006), and Nachatter Singh Garha (2020a) for India; and by Ali Nobil Ahmad (2007; 2009; 2011), and Camillo Regalia and Cristina Giuliani (2012) for Pakistan. This tendency positively reflects some of the structural developments that have been characterizing migration studies as a whole over the last thirty years, concomitantly with the increasing circulation of feminist strands of critique of the implicitly masculine stance previously dominating the field, and with the consequent consolidation of gender-sensitive lenses for the study of migratory phenomena across the world (Nawyn, 2010). What is perhaps even more relevant is the fact that these discussions of gender in migration do not systematically reproduce the ‘gender equals female’ trope, still fairly widespread across migration scholarship (Della Puppa, 2019, pp. 112-113; see also Luibhéid, 2004, pp. 232-233). Instead, critical explorations of masculinities, as well as gender-sensitive analyses of men’s experiences in migration, occupy the center stage in some of the most relevant among the works listed above (Ahmad, 2007; 2009; 2011; Della Puppa 2014; 2018; 2019). This represents an important element already in and of itself, given that, even though migrant men have long been the main, if not the sole, object of attention for migration studies, migrant masculinities paradoxically constitute an extremely under-researched area of scholarly enquiry – an academic posture, this one, that comes with significant consequences. On the one hand, as anticipated above, some of the most refined bodies of gender-attentive scholarship tend to conflate ‘gender’ with ‘women’ (Luibhéid, 2004, pp. 232-233), thus limiting their attention to women’s experiences alone, while also silently endorsing the misconceptions that gender only belongs to women, and that gender only has to be named and made the object of enquiry if women’s experiences are at stake (Della Puppa, 2014). On the other hand, the majority of ‘classic’ studies of migration deals with migrant men implicitly, without feeling any particular need to specify it, but rather taking ‘man’ as the silent norm. Against this backdrop, naming masculinity as a site for critical enquiry becomes a crucial epistemological strategy to further demystify the aura of universality that the male subject has been accorded historically, and well beyond migration scholarship alone (see e.g., Cavarero, 2002). A strategy, this latter one, that the Italy-based corpus of research under scrutiny here is fully participant in. Additionally, this gender-sensitive analysis of masculinities in migration acquires enhanced significance in relation to the specific reality of migratory phenomena from South Asia to Italy, which have historically constituted mostly male-driven flows of mobility. Today, too, Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrations are both characterized by two of the highest levels of gender imbalance among all of Italy’s migrant communities, with respectively 72% and 73.5% of the total individuals belonging to these groups

being male (Ministero del Lavoro 2023a; 2023c)⁸. This is a tendency that the present research, too, reflects, as it has predictably ended up managing to involve almost exclusively people identifying – at times, disidentifying – to various degrees and in different manners with the categories of ‘man’ and ‘male’. In such a male-dominated landscape, critical, in-depth scrutiny of migrant masculinities proves especially timely and instructive.

Particularly relevant in this sense are the works by Francesco Della Puppa (2014; 2015; 2019), and Mohammad Morad and Jure Gombač (2015; 2018), who have devoted a great deal of scholarly attention to the “transformations of masculinity that take place in the institution of the adult lives of Bangladeshi migrants to Italy” (Della Puppa, 2019, p. 113). In other words, to investigations of how migrants ‘become’ men in the diaspora. Francesco Della Puppa (2014; 2015; 2019), in particular, has done so by looking at how Bangladeshi men in Italy experience marriage – especially when this involves women still located in Bangladesh – and the subsequent processes of building a nuclear family in the diaspora through family reunification. Starting off from family reunification itself as the primary standpoint for the conduction of his analysis, the range of interests covered by Della Puppa’s works on Bangladeshi collectivities in Italy expands to reach several other clusters of gender-related issues: intergenerational dynamics as they take place both transnationally and within the diasporic group; ruptures and continuities between the newly-formed nuclear family in the diaspora and the family of origin back in Bangladesh, as well as between the masculinity models adopted by fathers in Bangladesh and those embraced by their migrant children in the diaspora; the hopes and disillusionments tied to migration-induced social mobility, and their effects on migrants’ conceptualizations of their own manhood; public representations and self-representations of migrant masculine identity; and, finally, intimacy related tensions and dynamics that shape the married life of newly-joined couples in the diaspora (Della Puppa, 2014, p. 11). All of these issues make up critical clusters of analysis that prove fundamental to illuminate the complex workings of gender in migration: the ways, that is to say, through which gender actively comes to shape people’s lives within a migratory and/or diasporic context, both in and of itself, as well as through its multiple interactions with labor, religion, racialization, and generational dynamics. However, by limiting their attention to milestones of male adulthood such as marriage and family reunification; by investigating the effects of these same processes on constructions and understandings of manhood; again, by analyzing masculinities and their representations mostly through husband-wife and father-children relationalities, these reflections invariably end up restoring an image of South Asian – in this specific case, Bangladeshi – migrations to Italy as steeped in normative heterosexual assumptions. In other words, they end up taking for

⁸ Indian communities regularly registered on the Italian territory show, instead, a much higher level of gender balance, with a 41.3% of women, and a 58,7% of men (Ministero del Lavoro, 2023b).

granted heterosexuality and heteronormativity as their inevitable – in a way, inescapable – reference points. The possibility that these pivotal steps of manhood-construction in migration may constitute problematic clusters for people whose sexual and/or romantic desires clash with heteronormative expectations is never fully contemplated by these analyses. At most, it is briefly acknowledged in passing⁹ (see Priori, Mapril, and Della Puppa, 2020, p. 9). In a similar vein, a critical reading of masculinity and manhood that might imply the existence of embodiments which defy gender normativity – be they longed for, actually put into being, and/or disavowed – is again excluded by the purview of these studies, as if the possibility for gender defiance to happen in migration simply could not exist. Even though these dynamics represent less the result of an explicit heteronormative agenda, than an unwanted consequence of the posture assumed by an otherwise illuminating body of scholarship, they nonetheless contribute to keep migrant subjects inscribed within a horizon of compulsory heterosexuality: one that comes to be silently normalized through its constant repetition, even across the most refined and innovative gender-sensitive analyses of dynamics of South Asian migration and diaspora formation in contemporary Italy.

A similar pattern gets reproduced also throughout the otherwise extremely compelling reflections on migrants' sexuality and manhood put forward by Ali Nobil Ahmad (2007; 2009; 2011) against the backdrop of Pakistani 'illegal' labor migration to Italy. Ahmad's reflections have the additional merit of addressing the other great absentee of this entire body of works on Italy's South Asian diasporas, the elephant in the academic room which looms large in many of the contributions listed above, without, however, being addressed explicitly: sexuality. If gender has started being taken into account as a crucial axis for understanding migratory and diasporic dynamics of South Asian presence in Italy, the same cannot, in fact, be said about sexuality, with sex, eroticism, and sexual desires systematically being ignored and excluded from the purview of this body of scholarly enquiry. It is thus not surprising that the starting point for Ahmad's discussion coincides precisely with a critique of this same sexless allure that gets so consistently attributed to migrants, all across academic analyses of transnational migrations. With a statement that sums up the overall stance that the present research, too, adopts, Ahmad (2009, p. 310) defines migration studies as "a field in which the protagonists are only rarely discussed as complex social beings, willing and able to experience the full range of human emotions the rest of us take for granted", including, perhaps especially, "love, sexual desire and romantic sentiments". Starting from this acknowledgement, Ahmad's argument develops as follows:

⁹ In the closing remarks of their paper, Andrea Priori, José Mapril, and Francesco Della Puppa (2020, p. 9) do in fact concede: "[D]espite the salience of a pattern of family reunification, scholarly research cannot assume that Bangladeshi sociality is exclusively based on a model of heterosexual marriage. These themes pinpoint the scientific limits of our work, providing important vectors for further research, and making it clear that there are more ways to be a Southern European probashi in the thick of social life than merely those represented in our ethnographies".

rather than migrants constituting a category of inherently and ontologically a-sexual¹⁰ individuals – as they are, indeed, systematically represented –, it is instead the materiality of life in migration that forces them to experience a profound and pervasive sense of sexual deprivation. Because of the class position and role in the labor economy that male Pakistani migrants come to occupy after migrating to Italy, and because of concomitant processes of migration-induced racialization, they get relegated to a regime of forced sexlessness: that is to say, of entire abstraction from the sphere of the sexual, in all of its possible nuances. They become, in other words, the cogs in a capitalist and racist machine of “sexual de-materialization” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 320). This means, in turn – and it is here that the core of Ahmad’s argument lies – that they are denied the status of *normative heterosexual men* in the first place, as they get excluded from that same process of gender melancholia, which, according to foundational interventions in queer theory (Butler, 1993a; 1999), is precisely what creates normative heterosexual subjects, through the disavowal of the potential to experience homosexuality. As Ahmad puts it (2009, pp. 310-311), “such are the consequences of migration for Pakistani migrants that migrancy [...] entails a denial of the very ‘normative’ heterosexual identity that is the object of critique in Butler’s seminal writings.” And again (p. 322):

[T]he migrant experience of sexuality in advanced capitalist societies is in many ways the opposite of that which produces hegemonic or dominant modes of heterosexual identity. The latter, as theorised by Butler (1993, p. 113), is ‘materialised’ in an oppressive process that produces identity by severing the heterosexual subject from its potential to experience same-sex love. The heterosexual, according to Butler, is thus doomed to experience melancholia for the loss of queer desire – a loss unknown to itself, but present nonetheless. This line of argument may be pertinent for those whose bodies are materialised through the temporal processes Butler analyses (1993, p. 10). But sexual oppression for the migrant lies precisely in being condemned to a spatio-temporal universe outside of the whole sphere of normative sexuality, in which bodies do not materialise according to heterosexual/heterosexist norms.

This argument sheds unprecedented light on the complex relationalities flowing between migrants and sex, as well as, in turn, between migrants and sex, on the one hand, and labor, capitalism, and racism, on the other¹¹. However, notwithstanding its attempts to critically engage with queer theory by showing the limited relevance it holds in relation to a context of often oppressive, all-consuming racialized labor migration, this line of argument still comes up short on one crucial aspect: it once again fails to get rid of heterosexuality as its implicit reference point, in this way actively foreclosing

¹⁰ I employ the spelling ‘a-sexual’ rather than ‘asexual’ to distinguish the construction of the migrant as inherently alien to the sphere of sex and sexuality from the homonymous identity and relational category of asexuality. The latter, in fact, encompasses a wide variety of relational styles and sexual behaviors, which do not always correspond to total abstraction/abstention from sex – even though this, too, is a possibility. For further reading, see Appia, 2024; Chen 2020.

¹¹ Unprecedented for the specific context of Pakistani/South Asian labor migration to Italy.

the possibility that some migrants might not – and in fact, as it will emerge from the present research, very much don't – aspire to the status of normative heterosexual men in the first place. Ahmad is aware of this potential criticism, and the rationale that he proposes to make better sense of his stance relates to the peculiar status that the realm of the sexual holds in South Asia, where “the Western taboo on homosexuality” is described as being “less relevant” (2009, p. 315):

‘[H]eterosexual’ identity in South Asia is constructed, experienced and policed in ways that differ from Western norms. If the latter are formed through the establishment of a radical split that entails repudiation of same-sex love, as authors as diverse as Lacan and Butler have noted, the Western taboo on homosexuality that has become the object of queer studies seems less relevant in Pakistan, and South Asia more generally, where deep-felt intimacy, tenderness and affection between men is exalted and manifested in a wide range of social practices.

Even though these considerations on the status that male-male intimacy holds in South Asia are pertinent and not at all wrong (see khanna, 2016, on the concept of “sexualness”), this line of thinking discards the issue of migrants’ homo and/or heterosexuality too simplistically, ending up reproducing the comforting yet problematic trope according to which ‘nobody is gay in Pakistan’ because male-male sexual conduct often does not converge into forms of gay identity, and male homo-sociality is not necessarily stigmatized (see Hossain and Rahman, 2024)¹². Sure enough, two men in Pakistan may share intimacy without this automatically transporting them into an ontological realm of homosexuality. But what happens, for instance, when someone assigned ‘male’ at birth starts not only to desire other men, but also to show signs of gender defiance, which put him/her at a distance from maleness tout court? Or again, when someone else claims his male-male desires and intimacy as ‘gay’ in Pakistan, too? And what happens, then, when these and other ‘someones’ leave Pakistan behind and attempt to start over in a country like Italy, and for reasons that have to do, at least to in part, also with their gender/sexual defiance? As this research will attempt to show, much more nuanced realities can hide behind the discourses on the sexual in South Asia that Ahmad’s (2009) argument relies on – inhabiting it, giving shape to it, but also complicating it from the inside. Some of these realities comprise forms of ‘gay’ identities and/or behaviors, ‘queer’ desires, and, crucially, gender-defiant embodiments, which sometimes adhere to global understanding of queerness, other times don’t, other times again do and do not at the same time, depending on contingencies of class, migrant status, language, and overall life-in-migration (see, among others, Dutta and Roy, 2014; khanna, 2016; see also Chapter Two and Chapter Four of this thesis for a more thorough discussion of the topic in direct relation to

¹² Incidentally, it is the same trope which can just as easily translate in the opposite, perhaps provocative, argument according to which everyone in Pakistan is gay.

participants' lives)¹³. In other words, sticking to this simplified discourse of South Asian male homo-sociality as necessarily 'non-gay', or as overall unproblematic, prevents Ahmad from seeing the 'queer' (i.e., the gender and/or sexually defiant) in migration, or, at least, from leaving open the possibility that something 'queer' or defiant in migration can exist in the first place. As a consequence, this otherwise deep and unprecedented analysis of the materiality of Pakistani migrants' sexual lives in Italy ends up paradoxically reproducing heterosexuality's pervasiveness exactly by way of underlining its very absence, with migrant men consequently being described as affected by the "key loss" of the feminine (p. 321) throughout their post-migration lives. While this loss might indeed be a crucial concern for many of them, I wonder where does this and other analogous conclusions leave all those migrant individuals who do not aspire to join with the feminine at all, or, perhaps even more meaningfully, who would rather inhabit the feminine themselves, in their own bodies, instead of craving it as their sexual/romantic other. No matter how significant and original Ahmad's (2008; 2009; 2011) academic posture in the landscape of socio-anthropological investigations of Italy's South Asian diasporas is, it nonetheless only works as long as any instance of 'queerness' is effaced from its purview – made impossible, in fact, insofar as it is conceptualized as alien to South Asian sociality 'proper'.

To sum things up, two different but related sets of effacements appear to be reproduced across socio-anthropological literature on South Asian diasporas in Italy. The first one is an effacement of sexuality. Even though the realm of the sexual, in all of its nuances, lures underneath the discussions of gender and masculinity, marriage and family reunification, husband-wife and parents-children's relationships (see Della Puppa 2014; 2018; 2019; Morad, 2021), that dot this academic landscape, it is however very rare to find it addressed either directly or explicitly across this body of works. The second set of effacements concerns what can be broadly defined as the realm of 'queerness', or, to employ a less loaded expression, of sexual and, crucially, gender defiance in migration. Currently available discussions of gender dynamics in the diaspora, as well as the very few contributions that do directly address sexuality, both rest on the erasure of the possibility for the non-heterosexual migrant subject to even exist in the first place. With virtually no exception, the studies enlisted above project a heterosexual and heteronormative gaze on the migratory and diasporic formations they analyze, even if they do so through refined gender-sensitive lenses, or through critical engagements with queer theory rooted in area-sensitive understandings of the realm of the sexual itself. By doing so, I argue, they more or less inadvertently contribute to neglect and obfuscate all those languages,

¹³ As Dutta and Roy (2014) remind us, when it comes to the South Asian context, taking into account homo-sociality and male-male sexual behavior and practices is not enough. It is rather gender defiance – 'effeminacy' – to most often constitute the line across which community is built, on the one hand, and oppression and violence are operated, on the other (see further in this thesis, Chapter Two)

embodiments, and relational dynamics potentially escaping heteronormative logics, that do, instead, circulate throughout South Asian migratory and diasporic formations in Italy – even if not necessarily in conventionally ‘visible’ manners, nor through identity-based discourses of lgbt-ness. It is exactly to some of these sets of in/visible instances of sexual and gender defiance in migration that the present research will thus turn. Before getting to that point, however, another detour into academic literature proves necessary. Although not sufficiently addressed by socio-anthropological works on South Asian collectivities in Italy, sexuality and ‘queerness’ are, in fact, made objects of analysis by another strand of migration research, which has been developing in Italy only over the last decade: the multidisciplinary field internationally known as ‘queer migration studies’. It is thus necessary to turn to an overview of the latter, too, in a move to pin down both its merits and its shortcomings.

II. Queer Migrations to Italy: The Missing Geography of an Emerging Field

Even though sexuality remains largely effaced across area-specific research on South Asian presence in Italy, it has nonetheless become, over the past decade, an increasingly central theme within another body of multidisciplinary scholarship, focusing explicitly on queer/lgbt+/SOGI migration to Italy – a field that can be provisionally assembled under the broad, functional rubric of ‘Italian queer migration studies’. With this formula, I refer to the corpus of scientific works centered on those trajectories of queer migration (Mole, 2021) that assume Italy as their destination point, and that in most, though not all, of the cases are either produced by Italy-based scholars, or stem from within the Italian academic context¹⁴.

Within the broader academic landscape of queer migration studies, queer migration (Mole 2021) – alternatively, sexual migration (Carrillo, 2017) – has been conceptualized as a complex system of two-way relationalities flowing between queerness and mobility, each understood, in turn, as a dense assemblage of power, able to exert its influence on the other (Cantú, 2009). In the Italian context, however, a more specific configuration seems to have taken shape: one whereby queer migration has become largely conflated with Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) based asylum (Giametta, 2022) see Danisi et al., 2021)¹⁵. As lamented already by the very first work to explicitly deal with the topic of lgbt+ migrations to Italy (Lelleri and Pozzoli, 2009a), Italian public discourses on migration tend to be dominated by one specific ‘typology’ of lgbt+ migrants, comprised of people who escape their home-country for fear of violence and persecution related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and, on those same grounds, apply for asylum in Italy. According to the authors

¹⁴ There are, of course, several exceptions to this configuration, which I make here out of organizational convenience more than anything else. See, e.g., Ingvars, 2024.

¹⁵ As Calogero Giametta (2022) underlines, this can be read as a more broadly European scholarly tendency. One that, however, Italy perfectly reproduces.

of the study, despite constituting an existing phenomenon whose often-tragic reality cannot be ignored, this kind of ‘forced’ mobility only makes up for a very small percentage of the total of lgbt+ migrants present in the Italian territory, with most of them better identifiable, instead, as economic migrants, students, ‘second generation’ Italians¹⁶, or, even, exploratory migrants (p. 9). And yet – they go on to further claim – because of the dramatic nature of their stories and of the high level of commitment shown by Italian lgbt+ associationism in their cases, SOGI asylum claimants and refugees seem to have become the only possible actors within trajectories of queer migration to Italy, both in policy, as well as in popular discourse and imagination (ibid.).

More than fifteen years later, in an increasingly hostile context towards migrations where asylum has remained virtually the only legal/izable channel for migrants to enter Italy (Sciurba 2018; Sorgoni 2022; see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.1), this asymmetry has only intensified¹⁷. In fact, not only does SOGI asylum occupy a central place within Italian activist and policy frameworks; but, in line with a similar trend widespread in both North American and European scholarship alike (see, among others, Akin, 2017; Gartner, 2015; Giametta, 2017; 2020; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Hathaway and Pobjoy, 2012; Koçak, 2020; Lewis and Naples, 2014; Millbank, 2009; Mole, 2021; Spijkerboer, 2013; Tobin, 2012; Wessels, 2011), it also structures much of the academic critical reflection on queer migrations to Italy produced to date (Boccaletti and Mastellari, 2017; Danisi, 2021; Danisi et al., 2021; De Capitani and Del Guercio, 2021; Ferrara, 2019; Ferrara et al., 2021; Ingvars, 2024; Martorano and Prearo, 2020; Toso, 2021). There is, in fact, a point that Raffaele Lelleri and Laura Pozzoli’s (2009a) initial critique of lgbt+ refugees’ discursive monopoly could not pick up on, and it is the one concerning the rationale that has been fueling such a consistent surge of academic interest in SOGI asylum over the last fifteen years. Even though the reification of the SOGI refugee as the ideal queer migrant undeniably plays a role in establishing and reproducing her discursive centrality, the current relevance of SOGI asylum in scholarly discourse proves to be linked, at least in part, also to an academic commitment to uncover and deconstruct the problematic logic that underlies the functioning of the SOGI asylum apparatus in and of itself. The possibility to apply for international protection on grounds of one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity, in fact, rests upon a deeply problematic rationale, which crystallizes around two interrelated pillars structuring the assessment of

¹⁶ That of ‘second generations’/‘2Gs’ is, today, a highly-contested label. I am reporting it here as such, because it is the one that Lelleri and Pozzoli (2009a) use in their report.

¹⁷ Asylum has remained virtually the only legal/izable route to expunge fortress Europe, *at least for now*. At the time of the final editing of this Introduction (February, 2026), the European Union has approved amendments to the Asylum Procedures Regulation within the framework of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, introducing both a common European list of so-called ‘safe countries of origin’, as well as an expanded notion of ‘safe third country’. These changes significantly broaden the grounds on which applications may be declared inadmissible, and permit transfers to third countries with which the Union or a Member State has concluded an agreement, even in the absence of a prior connection between the applicant and that country.

claimants' credibility (see Ferreira, 2022): first, a process of institutional victimization, whereby applicants are required to narrate themselves as unequivocal victims of persecution in their country of origin; and second, an imperative of homonormative intelligibility, which compels them to render their queerness legible within the adjudicating authorities' preconceived framework of what non-normative gender and sexuality ought to look like (Giametta, 2017; Martorano and Prearo, 2020; Murray, 2016). Failing either to convincingly perform life-threatening vulnerability, or to embody a recognizable – that is, Western-liberal – script of lgbt+ identity may result in the denial itself of protection. The problematic nature of this logic surfaces at every stage of the procedure: in the re/traumatizing potential of forcing diverse life trajectories into fixed narratives of victimhood; in the cultural imperialism implicit in dismissing sexual and gendered vocabularies that do not neatly align with Euro-American identity categories; and in the production of binary distinctions between 'genuine' queer refugees and allegedly 'bogus' claimants, believed to instrumentalize sexuality in order to access otherwise denied paths to transnational mobility (Ferreira, 2022; Martorano and Prearo, 2020; see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.).

Those strands of Italian queer migration scholarship that turn to assessments of SOGI asylum through a critical and ethically-engaged approach mostly do so to document exactly the dynamics described above. Olivia Guaraldo, Dany Carnassale, and Massimo Prearo, for instance, in their respective individual contributions to the volume *Migranti LGBT. Pratiche, politiche e contesti di accoglienza* (Martorano and Prearo, 2020), all highlight the pervasive enforcement, upon claimants, of problematic mechanisms of victimization and sexual hyper-culturalization, as well as the imposition of falsely global horizons of meaning (Guaraldo, 2020, p. 8) concerning gender and sexuality, before and/or during the asylum adjudication procedure. These are all elements that prove inherent to the functioning of the SOGI asylum apparatus as a whole, and that thus risk getting more or less consciously reproduced by the workings of Territorial Commissions – i.e., the organs in charge of evaluating on asylum procedures in Italy, through individual interviews with claimants called *audizioni* (lit. 'auditions') (Danisi et al., 2021, p. 106). This happens even in spite of the fact that Italy has proven to be a relevant site for the implementation of so-called 'good practices' in the management of SOGI asylum cases, especially if compared to other European countries (Boccaletti and Mastellari, 2017; Danisi et al., 2021; de Capitani and del Guercio, 2021; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011)¹⁸. And

¹⁸ According to data emerging from numerous different sources (Boccaletti and Mastellari, 2017; Danisi et al., 2021; de Capitani and del Guercio, 2021; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011), these good practices can be summarized as follows: first of all, according to Italian jurisdiction, and contrary to what happens in other European countries, the existence of laws condemning homosexuality in the applicants' country of origin is considered to be persecutory per se, whether such laws are enforced in practice or not. Along these same lines, the fact that homosexuality is even only formally criminalized in the applicant's country of origin is enough to infer that there would be no protection from the State in case of persecution of the subject by non-State actors. The claimant is thus not expected to have resorted to State protection in the country of origin before applying for asylum in Italy. Secondly, Italy has virtually no record of having applied so-called 'discretion

yet, the impact that the broader logics of the SOGI asylum apparatus do, nonetheless, have on claimants' lives is such that Massimo Prearo (2020, p. 51, my translation) speaks in this regard of the existence of a "moral politics of LGBTI asylum", which he defines as

the production, circulation, and appropriation of the tools of public policy – such as the SOGI framework – employed by institutional agents in order to evaluate values, affects, subjectivities, existential paths, identities, and narratives, and, therefore, to govern, regulate, and select LGBTI migrants' asylum requests.

In this sense, then, asylum operates as nothing less than a technology of governmentality, with gender and sexuality – their identity-coded renditions via the SOGI rationale, at least – concomitantly working as instruments of migration management and border control, rather than solely as innocent descriptors of people's identities, behaviors, and/or interiorities (Cantú 2009; Luibhéid 2013; Luibhéid and Cantú, 2005). In other words, against the broader landscape of Italian migration management and immigration laws, gender and sexuality become tools in the hands of authorities to establish who deserves to enter Italy, and who does not (see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three).

In light of all this, the high level of critical scrutiny currently being accorded to this specific trajectory of mobility by Italian queer migration scholarship does not constitute a problem per se. If anything, a radical and systematic critique of the SOGI asylum regime, carried out from ethically-engaged and academically-sound positions, is not only useful, but also urgent and necessary. The problem arises, however, when the asylum apparatus ceases to function merely as an object of critique, and becomes, instead, the primary epistemological filter through which queer migration to Italy is rendered intelligible in the first place. When queer mobility is read predominantly through the lenses of persecution, escape, and protection that the logics of SOGI asylum inevitably warrant, the figure of the 'queer migrant' risks being constructed as a subject whose 'queerness' can only constitute a rupture: something that begins at the moment of persecution, or, at most, at the moment of reception in a 'safe' country, and whose emergence can only be understood as a tearing, an interruption of what preceded migration itself. That of the queer migrant becomes, in other words, a story only narratable within the simplistic language of escape and refuge, oppression and salvation, that the asylum apparatus itself expects and rests upon. Even more crucially, a narrative with no past history

reasoning', i.e., the highly problematic logic according to which, if the claimant were to be evaluated as potentially able to live 'safely' in the country of origin by virtue of being 'discreet', then the granting of asylum would not be deemed necessary. Thirdly, Italy does not resort to any medical consultation or practice to determine the claimant's 'true' sexual orientation, nor considers the applicant's married status a precondition for denial. Finally, the Territorial Commission called on to adjudicate on a case has to include one member of UNHCR among its components, for a total of at least 6 members (AIDA, 2023). Having said that, the ascertained existence of good practices in the implementation of SOGI asylum legislation does not automatically exclude Italy from the purview of the above-mentioned criticism on the nature of the SOGI asylum machine as a whole. If anything, both of these realities coexist in an ever-delicate balance, which, moreover, is constantly being shaped and re-shaped by the frequent and abrupt changes that periodically occur in Italian migration law.

nor past geography, as it indeed gets told by the majority of interventions in Italian queer migration studies.

Now, to say that Italian queer migration scholarship as a whole straightforwardly reproduces asylum-centered, homonationalist (see Puar, 2007) discourses as the ones scrutinized above would not only be quite simplistic, but also quite simply wrong. Take, for instance, research that deals with lgbt+ migrants' experiences of racial and/or homophobic discrimination, with their 'integration' within Italian society and Italian lgbt+ sociality, and with migrants' relationalities to other members of their respective 'ethnic' communities in Italy (Carnassale, 2013; 2021a; 2021b; 2023; Castro and Carnassale, 2019; Mangone and Masullo, 2017; Masullo, 2015; Masullo and Ferrara, 2020; 2021; Matta, 2016; Medaglia, 2020). A recurring narrative to emerge out of many of these works is that of the double marginalization that queer migrant individuals find themselves facing, owing to their peculiar positionality as both queer *and* migrant/racialized subjectivities in Italy – in a context, that is to say, which is not particularly welcoming towards neither of the two (Castro and Carnassale, 2019; Mangone and Masullo, 2017). As a consequence, according to Giuseppe Burgio's formulation (2015, p. 25, my translation), lgbt+ migrant people in Italy come to occupy a space of "hyper-alterity", inhabiting, as they do, the peculiar experience of being read as both a sexual and an ethnic minority at the same time. At the intersection of this double-edged marginality lie, on the one hand, the ambivalent relationalities that queer migrants build with their fellow co-nationals, which are often described as being marked by varying levels of closeted-ness and by primarily necessity-driven contacts; on the other hand, migrants' openings towards Italian lgbt+ collectivities, which rarely result in an uncontested newfound freedom. More often than not, the latter generate other equally-ambivalent sets of relationalities marked by racist stances, including pervasive tendencies towards sexual racialization and/or erotic exoticization (Mangone and Masullo, 2017). Clearly, these dynamics are not equally reproduced against each and every queer migrant in the same way, as testified, for instance, by Aurelio Castro and Dany Carnassale's (2019) exploration of the experiences of bi+ men of color in northern Italy – subjects whose positionality is further complicated by their identifications with the often-contested label of bisexuality –, as well as by works that specifically focus on the experiences of even further marginalized groups, such as women (Masullo and Ferrara 2020; 2021), and transgender (Basseti, 2019; Coletta, 2021; Rosati et al., 2021; Vesce, 2021) migrants. Even from just a quick overview of this body of works, then, Italy certainly does not emerge as a queer-friendly safe heaven that asylum consigns migrants to, and that the "*queer migration to liberation nation*' narrative" (Murray, 2016, 'Introduction', emphasis in the original) would have contemplated.

And yet, notwithstanding these timid yet meaningful attempts at exploding the fiction of queer migration as a path towards queer liberation, that of queer migrants/SOGI refugees nonetheless tends

to be reproduced, across this body of Italy-based scholarly work, as a rather homogenous category of individuals, united as they are by comparable sets of experiences, mostly ascribable to the hyper-alterity they face as both lgbt+ and migrant subjects, and/or to their ‘refugeeness’ (see Malkki, 1995, p. 506). In fact, most analyses of queer migrations to Italy share a fundamental tendency to shy away from engaging with queer migrants as people that exist also *beyond* this framework of double-marginalization described so far. If something is still missing from Italian queer migration scholarship, then, it is a broader, properly anthropologically-inflected engagement with migrants’ everyday lives and imaginaries – and not only during migration and in its aftermaths, but, crucially, also *before* the inception of the migratory journey in and of itself (Carrillo, 2017). In other words, what these works overlook are the peculiarities of migrants’ respective contexts of departure: their ‘areas’, that is to say, apprehended in their geographical, political, social, linguistic, class, religious, but also sexual and gendered specificities. More specifically, they overlook the peculiarities of migrants’ contexts of departure not only as *loci* of societal, familiar, legal, and religious oppression for ‘queer’ people, as they are often almost exclusively characterized in literature – albeit they are, no doubt, also that; but also, perhaps especially, as locations nonetheless able to produce ‘queer’ and/or gendered and sexually defiant embodiments, languages, discourses, politics, desires, and forms of relationality, that many migrants bring along with themselves all throughout their complex paths of mobility to Italy – and that thus shape, and are shaped, in turn, by mobility itself (see Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2017). Instead, when Italy-based queer migration scholarship does turn towards migrants’ contexts of departure, it is almost exclusively to discuss the legal frameworks that are in place there to criminalize homosexuality, and that thus constitute one of the bases for the filing of their asylum applications in Italy (see e.g., Ferrara, 2021 et al.). In a similar vein, as already anticipated earlier, when lgbt+ migrants’ diasporic social ties do get taken into account, it is mostly in assessments of their relationships with the ‘straight’ components of their national and/or religious communities present in the Italian territory, which almost invariably lead to similar conclusions about migrants’ closeted-ness, strategic invisibility, and utility-driven connections with co-nationals. Alternatively, context is mentioned only in passing, as one background information among many others, which, in addition, gets often purposefully sidelined or obfuscated in research because of safety- and privacy-related concerns. This is the case even when scholars show some levels of self-awareness of the limitations inherent in their approach, as well as of the rich variety that characterizes queer migrations to Italy, both in terms of migrants’ identities and modalities of mobility undertaken (see e.g., Burgio, 2015, p. 26; Ferrara, 2019, p. 86).

However understandable the rationale behind such an approach might be, in doing so, most available Italy-based queer migration literature produces an effacement of the profound implications that migrants’ pre-migration lives and contexts of departure, in all of their stratified complexities, do have

on people's experiences of and in migration (see Carrillo, 2017). Even more seriously, it ends up reproducing an image of the SOGI refugee/queer migrant as a blank slate with no past, no geography, no language, and no previous understanding of gender and/or sexual defiance, who only becomes 'queer' once she has 'escaped' home and found refuge within Italian borders. To put it more bluntly, Italian queer migration scholarship seems to lack the interest – perhaps the ability – to adopt what I hereby term an 'area-sensitive' perspective in its apprehension of the complexities and layers that do invariably characterize people's lives and experiences, during, after, and – crucially – also before migration. Hence, if, as argued in the previous section, the South Asian migrant in Italy has systematically been constructed, via socio-anthropological literature, as fundamentally sexless yet invariably heterosexual at the same time, the queer migrant interpellated by Italian queer migration scholarship emerges via another, somewhat contiguous kind of effacement: the effacement, that is to say, of her past and geography, her class and politics, her sexual and/or gendered 'past' self.

That said, interrupting a narrative of queer migration as queer liberation, by revealing Italy as a problematic site of arrival for queer migrants and/or SOGI refugees, does remain a valuable operation undertaken by Italian queer migration studies. It is, however, not sufficient. In fact, I want to argue here, if this narrative is truly to be gotten over with, 'area' must return at the center of the analytical frame of Italy-based queer migration research. And not as a tool to crystallize people into the uncomfortable mold of either 'culture', or the post-colonial nation-state – a move, this latter one, that would taste of methodological nationalism more than anything else (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; see also Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013). But because only an area-sensitive engagement with migrants' situated life-stories (Eastmond, 1996, p. 235)¹⁹ – one attentive to the specific social, linguistic, sexual, gendered textures of their contexts of departure – can attempt to thoroughly disrupt the limiting side effects of the equation between queer migration and SOGI asylum delineated so far. The same side effects that, if left untreated, then percolate in research – in its posture, its attitude, and its conclusions – even when SOGI asylum is not made the central object of analysis.

There are of course some exceptions to the area-blindness dotting the Italian academic landscape delineated so far. The most elaborate area-sensitive explorations of queer migratory trajectories to Italy to date can be found in the work of anthropologist Dany Carnassale (Carnassale, 2013; 2021a; 2021b; 2023; Castro and Carnassale, 2019), who has devoted a substantial deal of scholarly attention to studying the experiences and relational dynamics of Senegalese gay and bisexual men living in Italy. In addition to this more structured and substantial corpus of works, Giuseppe Masullo's (2015) paper on the experiences of non-straight migrant males from the Maghreb region (namely, Morocco

¹⁹ In accordance with Marita Eastmond (1996, p. 235), all throughout this thesis I will prefer the formula 'life-story', to the more common 'life-history', in a move to underline "the inescapably fictitious dimensions of [the] work of memory, organization, and meaning".

and Tunisia), and Mara Matta's (2016) life-story of a Bangladeshi gay migrant in Rome constitute two other notable, although rather isolated, cases in point. Up to this day, however, virtually no robust study has been devoted to an anthropologically-informed, area-sensitive apprehension of queer/lgbt+ migrant groups present in the Italian territory, other than Senegalese gay and bisexual men. This exclusion also extends to people relocating to Italy from the South Asian region, who, moreover, seem to be generally underrepresented as individual participants and respondents in the available literature explored so far²⁰. With this thesis, I do not wish to take upon myself the duty to carry out such an exhaustive, robust study of queer South Asian presence in Italy. However, I do nonetheless aim at incorporating the thematical-methodological lens here introduced – one attuned, that is to say, to both 'area' and 'queerness' at the same time –, albeit to a small-scale, subjectivity-centered work: one that will focus on a few selected individual trajectories of ambivalent im/mobility from South Asia (from Pakistan and Bangladesh, more specifically) to Italy.

In light of the discussion carried out so far, before introducing in greater detail the methodological apparatus backing up this research, as well as the configuration of the fields across which it developed (see further on in this thesis, Chapter One), here it is first necessary to open up yet another parenthesis, this time into 'area' itself. More specifically, into the vast fields of South Asian queernesses (plural), that provide the general reference point to participants' sexually/gender defiant lives and imaginaries, both before, during, and after migration. Without purporting to offer an exhaustive account of a potentially immense landscape, the following overview will nonetheless contribute to add the final missing piece to the construction of the area-sensitive lens being operated so far.

III. Negotiating 'Queerness' in South Asia: A Very Brief Outline

The last, yet ultimately most generative, research question around which this project started to revolve – i.e., why would sexually/gender defiant people even want to leave South Asia behind in the first place, if South Asia itself holds for them a larger potential to live through their own 'queer' desires? – already presupposes, in and of itself, an image of South Asia as a space where at least certain instances of homoerotic and homosocial intimacy can circulate with relative freedom, if not even thrive, especially if compared with the harsh realities of racialized "sexual de-materialization" (Ahmad, 2009 p. 320) that migration almost invariably produces for those involved. An image, this one of South Asia as a space teeming with 'queerness', that openly contradicts the homonational expectations solicited by the SOGI asylum apparatus in and of itself, and that, as such, often has to

²⁰ This data proves particularly meaningful if compared to the case of individuals coming from the African continent and from South America, who not only tend to figure more often as subjects of scholarly attention, but also to more frequently appear among the beneficiaries of the services provided to queer migrants by Italian lgbt+ associations.

be simplified before the Territorial Commissions by claimants themselves, so that they can more easily meet expected criteria of forced escape and vulnerability. In contrast, as the ethnographic sections of this thesis will repeatedly show, it is in people's informal, everyday narratives, embodiments, and memories, that more nuanced – at times more ambivalent – representations of South Asia can be seen to surface. Indeed, to say that in the South Asian region 'queerness' can thrive, uncontested, for everyone in the same way, would be as wrong as to reiterate that South Asian countries – Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh all the more so – are homophobic prisons that people can only ever aspire to get out of. The situation on the ground is, predictably, much more complex and nuanced than either of these two discursive extremes can manage to convey. Differences in gender and gendered identifications, class status, urbanization, proximity to activism and related vocabularies of 'queerness', national and religious affiliation, as well as familiar and societal surveillance, among other things, all intervene to determine access, or lack thereof, to spaces where sexual/gender defiance can emerge, circulate, and possibly thrive, across the region – all of it unfolding across a framework additionally tinged by the haunting remnants of South Asia's colonial past, and overbearing homocolonial (Rahman, 2014; see also Hossain and Rahman, 2024) and homocapitalist present (Rao, 2020). It is exactly these already existing nuances, then, that processes of transnational migration cannot but further complicate.

Even though the drawing of an exhaustive portrait of something as broad, internally diverse, and elusive as 'South Asian queerness' lies beyond the scope of this research – of any research, perhaps –, in this brief section I nonetheless want to attempt to conjure some of the layers that come into play when pairing 'South Asia' with 'queer', even before adding 'Italy' and 'migration' to the equation. I want to do so, more specifically, by invoking the spatial-epistemological category of South Asia itself less as a reservoir of case studies, than as a site of theoretical enunciation for 'queerness' and gender/sexual defiance in the first place (see e.g., Chiang and Wong, 2016; 2017). By doing that, my aim is not to reify an essentialist divide between U.S./European queer theory, on the one hand, and local South Asian formulations and formations of the 'queer', on the other. Rather, I seek to highlight the dense network of discourses, relations, and asymmetries – global and local, trans- and intra-national – that shape the realm of 'queerness' itself across the region, as well as beyond it. To undertake such a move requires, first of all, resisting the temptation to treat the 'global' and the 'local' as neatly separable domains, and to rather apprehend their relation as a non-division – albeit one structured by undeniably profound power asymmetries, which also manifest in the production and circulation of knowledge, including 'queer' knowledge. As Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya (2007, p. xii) observe, contemporary sexual identities in the region emerge through “peculiar, particular, multiplicitous” negotiations of tradition, modernity, colonization, and globalization, that exist in a relation

of mutual encounter and friction. To speak of ‘queerness’ in South Asia today thus implies, first and foremost, navigating among competing orders of discursive production, which, even when opposite to each other, can rarely be exhausted in isolation, but rather exist in continuity with one another.

The first, most prominent of these orders is the one structuring around what Rahul Rao (2020, p. 18) understands as “the dialectical opposition between two statements that commonly frame scenes of queer postcolonial contestation—‘homosexuality is Western’ and ‘homophobia is Western’”. A first, widespread tendency across the South Asian region – particularly in vogue within certain strands of nationalist rhetoric – has indeed been to frame homosexuality as a Western import²¹: as an alien excrescence to be excised from the allegedly ‘authentic’, ‘pure’ core of the region’s culture and past (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001). The genealogy of this view is often traced back to the colonial encounter, and especially to the response of local elites to British denunciations of South Asian sexual and familial customs as ‘primitive’ or immoral. Rather than outright rejecting such accusations, reformist discourse frequently sought to recuperate an image of an originally pure and morally aligned Indian past, understood as having been subsequently corrupted by foreign intrusion (ibid.). Within this framework, homosexuality gets thus displaced onto this imagined moment of decline, with a strategy that, in the specific context of Hindu nationalism, Paola Bacchetta (1999, p. 143) terms of “xenophobic queerphobia”²². The opposing discourse – this one, particularly influential within reputable strands of Indian queer scholarship – reconstructs ‘queerness’ as intrinsic to the cultural and historical fabric of the Subcontinent, instead. Backed up by careful literary, artistic, and historical analysis, proponents of this hypothesis respond to claims of homosexuality’s ‘otherness’ by foregrounding how diverse sexual practices and gender formations did, in fact, exist and circulate rather freely in South Asia already centuries ago, well before any alleged ‘invasion’ or colonization of sorts had taken place (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001; see also Bose, 2014). From this perspective, then, it was the colonial intervention that came to mark a violent, long-lasting interruption in South Asia’s previously pluralistic gendered/sexual landscape. An intervention that, moreover, culminated in the formal codification of homophobia into law, through the introduction of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1861: an anti-sodomy provision still in force to this day in several states in and beyond the region (Chang, 2019; Shahani, 2019), including Pakistan (Khan, 2019a) and Bangladesh (Hossain 2019a; Siddiqi, 2009). Whether colonialism is invoked as the source of homophobia or, conversely, as the origin of

²¹ In the specific case of contemporary India, homosexuality is often framed, alternatively, also as an outright by-product of what gets problematically invoked, in turn, as the Muslim ‘invasion’ of the Subcontinent (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001).

²² This operation is complementary to another strategy that Bacchetta (1999) defines as “queerphobic xenophobia” a form of xenophobia in which queerness is ascribed – often metaphorically – to all subjectivities construed as ‘other’ in relation to the nation, regardless of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Among the preferred targets of this strategy are, for instance, Muslim men. Gay Muslim men, by contrast, find themselves at the intersection of both of the two rhetorical strategies just outlined (ibid.).

homosexuality itself, its specter nonetheless remains a haunting presence in contemporary debates on, and discourses of, gender/sexuality across South Asia. The fact itself that the colonial legacy on queer formations materializes concretely in the form of an active anti-sodomy piece of law makes it difficult – if not, in fact, illegitimate – to downplay the influence of the region’s colonial past both on its contemporary plural landscapes of defiant gender/sexualities, and on the diversified reactions that these elicit. The existence itself of Section 377 has been among the most significant factors in shaping attitudes toward homosexuality and queerness more broadly, as well as in structuring struggles for lgbt+ rights, all across the Subcontinent (Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007). To grasp the centrality of campaigns for the repeal of Section 377 – despite the fact that the provision has rarely been invoked, historically, to secure convictions for sodomy –, it is necessary to recognize that its most insidious and harmful influence operates primarily at the symbolic level. For a long time, and in some contexts still to this day, the existence itself of the law has been enough to legitimize homophobic attitudes and rhetoric across a wide range of settings, including the medical, familial, legal, and mediatic sphere (Narain, 2007). Section 377 has therefore remained at the center of debates on queerness and struggles for lgbt+ rights for years, and particularly in India, where the protracted legal battle for decriminalization – concluded in 2018 after a long and tortuous series of legal setbacks and campaigns (see Shahani, 2019) – constituted the primary arena in which queer politics articulated, often by stirring no small amounts of internal dissent within local lgbt+ circles, too (see e.g., Dave, 2012). Still enforced in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – where it appears as Sections 365 and 365A (Khubchandani, 2016) –, the relevance of Section 377 today significantly varies depending on the national context. In fact, its actual reach often intersects with, is reinforced, or, in some cases, is constrained by the existence of other legal provisions, such as Pakistan’s 1979 Offence of Zina Ordinance, or Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code and Section 86 of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance in Bangladesh (Shahani, 2019). Yet the historical legacies it embodies, its continued juridical presence, and its influence over the region’s sociocultural sphere, all ensure that it remains a deeply contested site of struggle and debate²³.

²³ In the broader context scrutinized by this research, whereby sexual migration out of South Asia happens primarily via the SOGI asylum regime, the relevance of an explicitly anti-sodomy law like Section 377 becomes even more instrumental: specifically, as a fundamental backdrop on which to rely for the securing of protection rights and documents in Europe. This is particularly the case in Italy, where, contrary to what happens in other European countries, and as already discussed earlier on in this text, the existence itself of laws condemning homosexuality in the applicants’ country of origin is considered to be persecutory per se, whether such laws are enforced or not. Along these same lines, the fact that homosexuality is even only formally criminalized in the claimant’s country of origin is enough to infer that there would be no protection from the State, even in case of persecution by non-State actors. All of this translates, in turn, into the particularly enhanced centrality of a law like Section 377 and the colonial legacy it represents, within the unraveling of Italy-based SOGI asylum adjudication procedures (on Italy’s good practices in SOGI asylum, see Boccaletti and Mastellari, 2017; Danisi et al., 2021; de Capitani and del Guercio, 2021; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011).

And yet, without undermining the relevance held by the region's colonial baggage on contemporary formations of 'queerness', here I also want to move beyond the dualism that both recuperative rhetorics explored so far entail – one of the two more convincingly and ethically than the other, no doubt. Together with Rao (2020), I am rather more interested in foregrounding the dangers inherent in the narratives of authenticity and locality that both these strategies rest upon, including when deployed in projects aiming at 'decolonizing' the 'queer'. As Rao underlines (p.19) those channeled by the 'homosexuality is a western import' vs. 'homophobia is a western import' debate are coterminously politics of space and time, both of which are "premised on a reification of the precolonial past into a spatiotemporal location that is constructed as entirely indigenous, uncontaminated by contact with the West or indeed any other external influence". What a closer engagement with contemporary instances of South Asian 'queerness' instead reveal is, once again, a much more complex picture: one whereby even the apparently most local instantiation of sexual/gender defiance ultimately proves to be the result of entangled negotiations of both locality and globality, with identitarian, legal, and epidemiological discourses all coming together to blur the possibility to draw neat boundaries between 'Western' and 'South Asian', 'authentic' and 'corrupted', when it comes to homophobia and homosexuality both. Against this backdrop, it starts to become ever more evident how South-North trajectories of migration, once they enter the picture, cannot but contribute to complicate further what already is, in and of itself, a constellation of extremely intricate realities.

'Queer' formations in South Asia already exist in an ever-ambivalent relation to globalized lgbt+ identity and community frameworks: one that cannot be simplistically subsumed under either an uncontestedly 'Western' or 'indigenous' banner. Categories such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'transgender', or 'queer' do widely circulate across the region, embraced by many as such, or reworked from within by many others. And yet, this is only part of the picture. In fact, they also coexist with, or get rejected in favor of, local identificatory vocabularies of sexual/gender defiance, which do not necessarily stand in a one-to-one correspondence with globalized identity taxonomies – which, at times, do not even entail 'identity' or the ontology of personhood that such taxonomies rest upon in the first place, in fact (khanna, 2016). That said, the more peculiarly 'local' categories of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), *kothi* (*kothī*), *murat*, or *hijra* (*hijrā*)²⁴, just to name a few, are by no means uncontested, or culturally transparent labels: they do not stand to signal, in other words, a more purely

²⁴ In turn, 'hijra' gets articulated through multiple local variants, which include *aravani* or *thirunangai* in Tamil Nadu, *kojja* in Andhra Pradesh (Reddy, 2019), *khusra* (often with a derogatory valence) in both Pakistani and Indian Punjab, *khawaja sara* (*khawāja-sarā*) in Pakistan. All these labels refer to different instantiations of collectivities of male-born, feminine-identifying people, who live together in hierarchically-structured, family-like arrangements, engage in specific professions (dancing at functions, begging, and sex work), and are additionally believed to possess the powers to bless or curse. As such, they are both revered and violently sanctioned at the societal level; recognized, at times even exalted, as culturally-intelligible expressions of South Asian gender defiance, yet pushed to inhabit some of the most marginalized positions in society. See also further on in this thesis, Chapter Two, Sections 2.3 and 2.3.

and authentically local dimension of ‘queerness’ or sexual/gender defiance ascribable to the realm of culture alone, and, as such, devoid of politics, oppressions, or contestations (see Cantú, 2009). However, they do come to complicate the picture drawn so far, by showing the limited reach that lgbt-coded, identity-based categories of gender and sexuality can have across the South Asian region. As Bose and Bhattacharyya (2007) observe, the rejection, or even the unawareness, of lgbt-coded identity categories which emerged, historically, in and for a different context – incidentally, one bound to South Asia through the latter’s complicated colonial past – is fairly widespread and understandable, particularly insofar as such categories can prove inadequate to speaking to the material reality of many sexual/gender defiant people in South Asian countries. Equally common and relevant is also the need to sever the nexus of inevitability between sexual practices and sexual identities, that globalized realms of lgbt-ness, instead, entail and rest upon (ibid.): between sexuality and personhood, and of sexuality-as-personhood. It can be necessary to embrace, in other words, what anthropologist akshay khanna (2016, p. 12) terms a realm of “*sexualness* that escapes the frame of sexuality, desire, and eroticism that flows through people without constituting them as subjects”. According to this view, in South Asia the erotic and the sexual need not be an integral part of identity construction in the same way that sexuality is: “who or what one desires or fucks” does not, in other words, necessarily defines “*what* one is” (p. 11, emphasis in the original), with the first and most immediate consequence of this framework being the diminished significance of the hetero/homosexual binary itself (for an expansion and partial critique of this framework, see Dutta and Roy, 2014; see also Chapter Two, Section 2.2.2.). According to khanna (2016), both sexuality and sexualness coexist in the Sub-continent, albeit in an increasingly unbalanced hierarchy towards the former, which has been subsuming instances of sexualness under its purview all across legal, epidemiological, and activist discourses. And yet, although legitimate and necessary in and of themselves, if not carefully contextualized, these operations of regionalization of the realm of the sexual can nonetheless risk falling into an analogously essentialist trap to the one they seek to resist in reference to globalized lgbt+ identity labels, and to thus crystallizing expressions of sexual/gender defiance within the stifling cages of cultural specificity and cultural relativism (Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007).

The case of hijra collectivities illustrates these and other related tensions between culture and identity, intelligibility and marginality, thriving and oppression, particularly well. The Hindustani term ‘hijra’ (*hijrā*) refers to a historically-sedimented and socially-recognized gendered subject position widespread across the South Asian region, albeit under multiple local denominations and with significant regional variation (Reddy, 2005; Nanda, 1990; Hossain, 2017). Although it may partially overlap with globalized categories of ‘transgender’ or ‘intersex’, the ‘hijra’ banner does not neatly correspond to either of the two. Rather, it conventionally stands to indicate socio-religious communities –

internally organized through strict hierarchies of *guru-chela* relationalities, and related sets of rules – typically associated with lower-class individuals assigned male at birth, who adopt a feminine gender expression and may or may not undergo ritual initiation practices, including, though not necessarily, forms of bodily modification (Nanda, 1990; Reddy, 2005). Endowed, in certain ritual contexts, with a form of sacralized authority and the power to either bless or curse – particularly in relation to fertility, childbirth, and auspicious ceremonies –, hijras are both revered and feared at the societal level. This aura of sacrality, however, does not ultimately prevent them from being relegated to a highly marginalized and despised positionality in South Asian societies: one ultimately tied much to hijras’ gender ambiguity, lower-class status, and reliance on begging, dancing, and sex work as their ‘preferred’ sources of income (Reddy, 2005; see also Khan, 2019). Hijras thus occupy a profoundly ambiguous place within the South Asian social order: deeply marginalized in everyday life, yet revered; targeted by vicious forms of both discursive and physical violence, yet, by virtue of their perceived greater cultural ‘authenticity’, accorded a level of societal and legal recognition that people identifying with the more decidedly ‘Western’ *lgbt+* acronym often lack. In Pakistan, for instance, ‘*khwaja sara*’ has officially been recognized by the state as a distinct sex/gender category and, as such, granted a range of legal protections not extended to members of the local *lgbt+* community (Khan, 2019a; Nisar, 2022). And yet, legal recognition and the enhanced degree of symbolic acceptance accorded to the community – partly grounded in its historical associations with the splendor of Mughal pasts – do not prevent *khwaja sara* collectivities from occupying some of the most violently marginalized positions within contemporary Pakistani society. A similar dynamic can be observed also in Bangladesh, where hijra communities’ demand for recognition as a third gender, formally granted in 2013, has tended to be regarded as more socio-culturally legitimate than local *lgbt+* activists’ claims for the repeal of Section 377 and in favor of sexual minority rights more broadly (Hossain, 2019a). In recent years, the latter have in fact been met with episodes of particularly brutal violence, culminating in the assassination of Dhaka’s two most prominent gay activists in April 2016, and in the subsequent shut-down of the city’s queer movement (Hossain, 2019a; 2019b). In line with the ambivalence highlighted thus far, however, the recognition accorded to hijra identities and life-worlds in Bangladesh is one largely grounded in a state-sanctioned paternalistic logic of pity toward these groups, whose members are perceived to be affected by a form of biological sexual ‘disability’, and, on this ground alone, deemed deserving of legal recognition – rather than, say, via an attentiveness to their gendered and sexual selfhoods (Hossain, 2019a; 2019b). In light of all this, as Adnan Hossain (2018, p. 322) stresses, it is thus necessary to apprehend the figure of the hijra “not as the product of an autochthonous/local/Indian context but as a subject position emerging at the interstice of complex inter/intra/transregionally inflected symbolic and material flows” – a statement, this one, that can also be

made to apply beyond the realm of hijraness alone, and to other ‘local’ sexually/gender defiant categories such as those of the kothi or the murat. Indeed, hijras’ positionality within South Asian societies is one that exposes particularly well how the relationship between ‘queerness’ and ‘belonging’ in the region cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between repression and authenticity, nor mapped onto a linear narrative of either culturalization or liberation through Western lgbt+ frameworks. Rather, what emerges is a layered configuration, in which certain sexual/gendered formations are legible, even legally recognizable, insofar as they can be contained within narratives of tradition and cultural specificity – and yet, this does not shield them from being made targets of vicious circles of physical and discursive violence; and others are cast as foreign, excessive, or politically dangerous – and yet, this does not prevent them from organizing, meeting, or creating safe spaces where ‘queer’ sociality and intimacy can thrive. In most, though not all, of the cases, the dividing line between safety and danger, repression and thriving, respectability and marginality, for sexual/gender ‘minorities’ in South Asia, ultimately boils down to class – and to wealth, urbanization, language, access to safe spaces, if not even to transnational spaces and to mobility itself, that from class depend (see e.g., Pamment, 2012; Siddiqi, 2011)²⁵. Attending to these differentiated regimes of intelligibility and queer im/possibility less as ‘things’ transparently relating to gender/sexuality alone, than as complex assemblages of ‘things’ that gender/sexuality are *not* – as *everything but* sexuality, as akshay khanna (2016) would have it (see further on in this thesis, Chapter Four, Section 4.2.) – is then indispensable if one is to grasp how gendered and sexual defiance is lived, negotiated, or constrained by individuals and collectivities in specific South Asian contexts, first of all. But, by extension, also why migration may ambivalently appear, for some, as a necessary rupture, for others as a strategic recalibration, and for others, still, as a loss of culturally anchored forms of recognition – although not necessarily always in predictable ways.

IV. Conclusion-Beginning: Towards an Area-Sensitive Reading of ‘Queer’ South Asian Ambivalent Im/mobilities to Italy

As the previous section started to uncover, one fundamental element was forcefully disappeared by the double-edged effacement of sexuality by area, and of area by sexuality, retraced in the pages above: an element that I have addressed only indirectly so far, but that will instead become the very core of this thesis, all throughout the chapters that will follow. I am referring to the realm of ambivalence. More specifically, to the ambivalence that characterizes participants’ life trajectories from

²⁵ Bangladesh’s ‘April killings’ in and of themselves stand to testify the limits of a reading of South Asian ‘queer’ circulations that only foregrounds class dynamics, at the expenses of other coterminous considerations on politics, religion, or even ‘culture’ more broadly.

South Asia to Italy – the latter to be understood, in turn, not only as instances of transnational migration ‘proper’, but also of im/mobility more broadly. What I want to suggest here is thus the following: when an ‘area-sensitive’ ‘queer’ lens – a lens doubly attuned to both ‘the sexual’ and ‘area’ at the same time, that is to say – is deployed within the present subjectivity-centered research project on sexual migrations from South Asia to Italy, both ambivalence and im/mobility necessarily surface as pivots around which migrant lives revolve. As both the ensuing methodological and ethnographic sections of this thesis will further illustrate, it is precisely this double shift in analytical posture – from sexual migration as an event involving anonymous, placeless, ahistorical ‘migrants’, to sexual migration as a combination of im/mobile processes connecting unique individuals from one decidedly geographic, historical, sexual/gendered ‘area’ to another – that makes ambivalence visible in the first place. In fact, that makes it, in a way, inevitable: something impossible to evade. It is at this exact same juncture, then, that im/mobility also emerges as coterminously a theme, a method, and an analytical lens for research.

Against this backdrop, all throughout the ensuing chapters, I will draw on, and further develop, an understanding of im/mobility not simply as movement across space and nation-state borders, but also as a political, power-inflected, and power-reproducing constellation of practices, meanings, and representations (Cresswell, 2006; 2010), that also involve, and overlap with, the realm of gender/sexuality. To do so, I will apprehend my interlocutors’ trajectories of movement from South Asia to Italy as unfolding across multiple, interlocking scales, ranging in vastness from the smallest component of the human body, to the globe itself. More precisely, these will include the corporeal scale of embodied gender/sexual expression; the relational scale of kinship, friendship, and diasporic networks; the quotidian, urban scale of walking, be it in neighborhoods, around shops, or along the city streets; the juridical scale of visas, asylum regimes, and migration management; and the transnational scale of imaginaries, memories, and affective attachments, developing across the boundaries of nation-state borders. Migration ‘proper’ will thus be restored as but *one* of several multifaceted dimensions of im/mobility, across which participants’ sexually/gender defiant lives get and/or are made to unfold: an extremely impactful one, for sure, but never isolated. In fact, one impossible to disentangle from other orders of movement and non-movement – some strictly spatial, others more discursive in nature, others, still, a combination of both – that traverse and shape migration at every turn, both informing it and exceeding it at the same time.

When looked at from this perspective, then, sexual/queer migrations from South Asia to Italy cannot be reduced anymore to linear passages from repression to freedom, as the SOGI asylum rationale would warrant; nor can they be adequately captured through an obsolete vocabulary of push and pull factors, as classic apprehensions of South-North transnational migrations would have called for. If

anything, far more central to my interlocutors' narratives will prove to be, instead, questions of desire – of wanting what you cannot have and not getting it, of wanting again, and of wanting more – that drive their migration projects 'West'. Crucially, desires that migration may, in turn, nurture further, or, more frequently than not, stifle and interrupt. It will thus be from this significantly adjusted posture that participants' life stories will begin to appear less as straightforward instances of 'queer' migration, than as constellations of ambivalent im/mobilities: as movements and non-movements of bodies, discourses, aspirations, and legal statuses; as advances and retreats across cities, streets, reception facilities, as much as across nation-state borders; as attachments that vanish, and attachments that remain. Moreover, constellations where desires, emotions, and sexuality – as well as everything else that sexuality is *not*, but that under the sexuality banner coalesces (see khanna, 2016) – will enter the picture more obliquely than one might expect. Participants' life and migration trajectories will thus turn out to be shaped much by what they seek, as by what they relinquish; much by hope as by disappointment; much by recalibration as by rupture. Im/mobility, in other words, will emerge as a dense assemblage of meanings, coterminously experiential and structural, through which wanting is articulated, frustrated, reoriented, or revived. By situating queer migration within the specificities of South Asian gendered and sexual formations, on the one hand, and by tracing how these formations are reworked, rather than simply erased, within the specificities of the Italian context, on the other, this thesis will ultimately illuminate how ambivalence shall not be read as an accidental by-product of mobility, but as the structuring condition of the desires by which mobility itself is coterminously fueled and hindered by – as *one* of its structuring conditions, at least.

The following four chapters will unfold these arguments progressively, both in relation to the methodological apparatus of this research, as well as to the ethnographic materials that constitute its very core. Chapter One: Ethnographic Movements and Moorings will turn to im/mobility first and foremost as a methodological problem, reflecting on how different orders of movement and non-movement – of bodies, narratives, and affects, both participants' and the researcher's – shape the very production of knowledge in this study. The ensuing ethnographic chapters will then move on to trace participants' ambivalent im/mobilities across an ascending scale of vastness, ranging from minuscule movements of and in the body (Chapter Two: Gesturing), to post-migration, everyday spatialized movements in space/s (Chapter Three: Walking), to South-North transnational sexual/queer migration 'proper' in and of itself (Chapter Four: Migrating). As the discussion will make clear, these scales are not to be apprehended as separate, independent avenues of enquiry, but, rather, as dimensions that inform each other all the time, even when it least seems like it. The distinctions that I will draw, all throughout this thesis, between the three different scales of gesturing (Chapter Two), walking (Chapter Three), and migrating (Chapter Four) have thus to be understood as valid on a heuristic terrain,

more than anything else: as analytically fruitful for the purposes of ethnographic writing, yet also as persistently unsettled by ethnographic materials in and of themselves – the latter repeatedly exposing the porosity and mutual implication of all three scales delineated above.

When taken together as an interconnected whole, what all these chapters will be able to offer their readers is, perhaps, no more than a few glimpses: first and foremost, glimpses into several scales of individual trajectories of queer – as well as *everything but* queer – migration from specific locations in South Asia to just-as-specific locations in Italy. Even more crucially, glimpses into migration as a whole, too, in turn not to be apprehended as a singular event, but rather as an ongoing process that unfolds across scales, across desires, and across times: a process, in fact, that does not end, and will not be finished, even when, in writing, one must pretend that it is.

CHAPTER ONE: ETHNOGRAPHIC MOVEMENTS AND MOORINGS

1.1. Prelude

When I first began to look into dynamics of narrating and embodying ‘queerness’ among South Asian people relocating to and/or living in Italy, it was March 2021, roughly one year and a half before the beginning of my PhD. At the time, we were still deep into Covid-19 pandemic-induced restrictions, and the possibility of going back to India, be it for research or travel, seemed incredibly far removed from the reality that we were living in. On top of the frustration caused by the periodic impossibility to step out of my house, let alone travel internationally, I was also feeling weighed down by the pressure of having to choose a topic for my M.A. thesis – and of having to choose it quick²⁶. Among the few things that I knew was the fact that I wanted to do something informed by queer theory and/or related to ‘defiant’, ‘non-normative’ expressions of gender and sexuality in South Asia. I had recently taken advantage of the pandemic idleness to finally make myself read Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1999), and even though at the time I had managed to understand it only partially²⁷, I felt like it had shaken up the way I was looking at both myself and the world so much that I could barely contemplate the idea of doing research on any other topic. However, I was also feeling uninspired and far-removed from South Asia as a whole, even though almost all of the (at the time, online) classes of my Master’s Degree in ‘Oriental Languages and Civilizations’ [*sic*] were revolving around the South Asian context in one way or another. I was also afraid that the field that I was nurturing the most genuine interest for – South Asian queer studies, understood in the broadest connotation of the category possible – was already saturated and ‘done with’, with no significant contribution left to be

²⁶ I want to acknowledge the conditions of social and class privilege that, at the peak of the pandemic, allowed me to feel this kind of discomfort rather than/in addition to others, such as fear of losing my job, of running out of money, of not having a place where to stay, or, even, of having to remain confined in an unsafe place. I do so exclusively as a way to be transparent about the conditions in which this research was born, as I will explore shortly after in the chapter. The sensations that I hint at here – and that can feel quite shallow today – were impossible to ignore back then and, as such, shaped all of my decisions, including those strictly related to research.

²⁷ At the beginning of her book *Decolonialità e privilegio* (2020, p. 18, my translation), in the paragraph devoted to the political value of making oneself understood, Italian geographer Rachele Borghi makes the following statement: “My most difficult coming out wasn’t the one about being a lesbian, much less the one about my queerness. It was about Judith Butler.” With that, Borghi introduces a broader reflection on the fact that it is possible and legitimate not to fully understand Butler’s theorizations, even if such an admission proves to be a particularly difficult one to make in an academic context where the philosopher’s texts now enjoy such a level of recognition as to make them – and understandably so, I would add – virtually indispensable to any discourse on queerness, gender, sexuality, as well as performativity and performance. Borghi locates this statement within a broader critical reflection on what she defines as a “a process of hyper-intellectualization” (p. 19) of knowledge, which ultimately has the effect of making this same knowledge inaccessible even to those that it directly addresses, and of which Butler’s texts represent the epitome. A critical, in-depth engagement with such a stance – rooted in the broader project of decoloniality – lies beyond the scope of the present work. These remain, nonetheless, valuable avenues for further reflection, both in and of themselves, and more specifically in relation to the writing of an ethnography such as this, which will unfortunately, although inevitably turn out to be partially unintelligible at least to some of the people who are being written about.

For more on this, see Borghi, 2020. For Butler’s defense of their own writing style as an inherent component of their theoretical project, see their preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1999, pp. vii-xxvi).

made (for an attentive criticism of this stance, see Horton, 2018b). Eventually, as it had already been the case many other times before, it was one phone conversation with my (both then and now) supervisor that helped move things forward, and the idea of shifting my attention from queerness in the South Asian region to queerness in the South Asian diasporas in Italy began to form. First of all – and as already thoroughly discussed earlier on (see Introduction) – the field lied virtually unexplored in terms of academic literature. Even more crucially for me back then, being an Italy-based project, it was a research endeavor that would have allowed me to overcome all those international mobility restrictions that, at the time, seemed destined never to be lifted again. In reality, the actual conduction of that preliminary project came with its own set of challenges, the most prominent one of them being the difficulty in finding participants willing to join the research: all the organizations working with lgbt+ migrants that I tried to get in touch with back then straight-up ignored me, snowball sampling did not pick up, and time constraints soon began to pressure me. Because of all these issues taken together, I eventually ended up basing my whole M.A. thesis on one life-story (see Eastmond, 2006) and one documentary film, both of which I managed to access through my supervisor's personal networks and thanks to her precious mediation. However small, this project nonetheless ended up constituting the starting ground for the future development of the present doctoral research and dissertation²⁸.

An odd mixture of personal interest in queer and sexuality studies, unpredictable tragic global circumstances, and practical considerations and anxieties on the actual doability of research thus came to constitute the very first basis for what would later become this thesis. Looking back in hindsight at that initial scenario now, a veil of irony seems to hover all around it. To put it rather bluntly, the un/conscious rationale lying behind it all turned out to be roughly the following: to evade the limitations imposed upon my own 'citizen-of-the-world', 'strong-passport-holder' kind of mobility – in other words, to escape my momentary condition of forced immobility, an aberration in the regular course of my life²⁹ –, I decided to turn towards the study of the sometimes forced, other times chosen, most of the times both/neither forced and/nor chosen mobilities of others³⁰. And, more specifically, of those particularly 'otherized others' who – in some cases even regardless of the pandemic itself³¹

²⁸ As a result of the history that I briefly retraced above, even though the findings that will be discussed in this thesis constitute the direct outcome of research conducted from November 2022 to October 2025 within the scope of the PhD course in 'Civilizations of Asia and Africa', Sapienza University of Rome, they are also inevitably informed by reflections, experiences, and struggles that predate the beginning of my doctoral journey of roughly one year and a half.

²⁹ By that, I do not want to imply that before the pandemic I used to be constantly on the move, travelling to a new destination abroad each month. Still, my class and passport privilege undeniably provided me with considerable amounts of – at least intra-European – mobility from my late teens onwards.

³⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of the trope of forced mobility understood as one of the core components of refugeeness, as well as for a broader analysis of migrants' typologization within contemporary regimes of migration management in Italy, see further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

³¹ To be fair, the pandemic did actually play a role in shaping the timings, modalities, and routes of mobility of quite a few of the participants involved in this research. Still, with the exception of the 2020 peak emergency time-span, almost

– were still attempting to make their way across often-hostile countries and strongly-enforced borders, with the aim to actualize some sort of prefiguration of a new/better life somewhere else away from ‘home’. Bitterly ironic, indeed, it is.

The reason why I bring up this initial anecdote here is because, besides providing a much necessary opening into my privilege and my own blindness to it, it also contains, within itself, the seeds that would later sprout into the critical, ethical, and thematic core of this PhD thesis: i.e., the constant, ambivalent tensions between different regimes and representations of mobility and immobility – better conveyed in its contiguous, rather than oppositional, nature by spelling it as im/mobility (see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2020; 2021; degli Uberti 2019; 2021; Nimführ and Sesay 2019; Salazar, 2019; Schapendonk and Steel 2014) –, structuring both participants and researcher’s lives, as well as the webs of relationalities between the former and the latter. Here, I refer to such a product/producer of this origin narrative as a ‘paradox of im/mobility’³² – in this initial case, the paradox of turning to study other people’s mobility because of the researcher’s own immobility –, and I will keep on doing so throughout the rest of this work, while exploring the other numerous nuances that it will take on, all throughout this research’s thematic and methodological, as well as ethical and political, grounds. Predictably enough, the one that I have just retraced here constitutes but the first of many other instances in which, subtle but pervasive, such a paradox percolated in, and informed, the methodological, thematic, and theoretical core of this research, in varied, sometimes unpredictable ways, which I hope the rest of the work will clarify and make sense of.

Against this backdrop, the overall aim of this initial chapter will be to explore the impact that such a layered and nuanced interrelation between mobility and immobility had on the very methodological structure of this research, and yet, at the same time, also to lay bare the difficulty in telling apart methodology- and content-oriented considerations of im/mobility in the context of the present work. There existed, in fact, a productive, if ambivalent relationality between different levels and scales of im/mobility, on the one hand, and the present research as a whole, on the other: one initially manifesting in the form of a perceived sense of ethnographic ‘failure’ – failure to find an adequate number of participants; failure to properly immerse myself in the field; failure to generate thick enough data –, but soon enough proving to be, instead, the crucial, critical component of an approach to migration research which was less interested in yielding big numbers, aggregated data, and generalizable conclusions, than it was inclined to get relationally and ethically attuned to people’s everyday lives – including the halts, ruptures, silences, and elusions, that people’s lives are invariably made of.

all of the participants managed to find their way to Italy at a time when restrictions on both international travel and internal mobility hadn’t been entirely lifted yet. I will account for these issues more in-depth throughout the corpus of this work.

³² I am grateful to professor Aditya Bharadwaj for being the first one to explicitly point out to me this irony as intrinsic to the present research.

Starting from these initial insights, I will thus devote this chapter to discuss and analyze the main practical, methodological, and ethical questions that shaped this research. In doing so, I will be focusing in particular on the following issues: the multiple levels of construction and co-construction that had to go into the making of this research's fields (plural) (Section 1.2.); the methodological choices that I had to negotiate all throughout my research practice (Section 1.3.); and, finally, the preliminary thematization of the aforementioned 'paradox of im/mobility', which provided the most pervasive, although sometimes subtle, framework across which this research – its ethical and political vocations, more than anything else – developed and took shape (Section 1.4.).

1.2. Constructing the Field(s): Fieldwork Configuration

As my previous M.A. experience had already prepared me for, the moment I resumed doing research on narratives and embodiments of 'queerness' among South Asian migrants in Italy for my PhD, I knew that the first and most prominent challenge I would have to face would be that of identifying participants, followed by those of choosing the best methodological strategies to engage with them carefully but fruitfully, locating the physical spaces where research could happen, and figuring out the logistics of research practice itself – in other words, the overall challenge of constructing the field (Amit, 2000).

The notion of the ethnographic field as something that, no matter its location, features, and setting, has to always be laboriously and patiently 'constructed' – rather than as an independently spatialized and bounded given, a place as geographically and as culturally far-removed from the researcher's everyday life as possible, which the researcher is supposed to simply access by simultaneously leaving her ordinary life outside of it – is not new to anthropology, and is certainly not unique to this research alone. Starting from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many have come to question the methodological sanctity of anthropology's most distinctive research practices – i.e. immersive ethnographic fieldwork far away from 'home', and participant observation – by highlighting the fictitious nature of the narrative of the anthropologist who 'goes into the field' and/or receives 'initiation to the field', when understood as parts of an act of total immersion and contextual abstraction from everything else which field is not (Amit, 2000; Clifford, 1992; Günel and Watanabe, 2023; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; 1997). This movement towards problematizing the field and exposing the fiction of immersion was brought about by changes occurring both in the academic and the outside world at large, and several elements fed into it: postcolonial critical moves against the exoticizing tendencies implied in the equation between the field and a geographical, temporal, and cultural 'other' (e.g., Fabian, 2014; Kapferer and Theodossopoulos, 2016); the increasing circulation of transnational ethnographies, mobile ethnographies (e.g., Knowles, 2000; Urry, 2007; see also Novoa, 2015), as well

as ethnographies developing across multiple ‘sites’ in a broader sense than the merely geographical one (e.g., Marcus, 1995); and a consequently increasing difficulty to draw neat boundaries between what counts as ‘home’ and what counts as ‘field’ (e.g., Caputo, 2000; Munthali, 2001), among others. To borrow the words that anthropologist Vered Amit was using in as early as 2000 (p. 6),

in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred.

The same relational labor of construction that Amit (ibid.) talks about lies at the very core of my research practice, too. In fact, it occupies a particularly relevant, if not straight-out central position in the present research endeavor, and for reasons that are methodological, as much as they are ethical and political in nature: intrinsically tied, that is, to the peculiar features of the fields traversed by this research, as well as to the overall approach that I have chosen to adopt throughout it. For if it is clear that anthropology has by now long succeeded in establishing that all fields – even the ones that seem to match the ethnographic ideal the most – are inevitably constructed, it is also true that some fields have to be more, and more painstakingly constructed than others. This research, I believe, is a case in point.

In order to understand why it is so, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the broader context and conditions in which this project itself is located. First of all, the present research has to be understood as fundamentally exploratory in nature, as there are virtually no academic contributions intersecting the three axes of ‘queerness’, ‘South Asia’, and ‘Italy’ to date (see Introduction). In a similar vein, as I am writing this, neither there seem to exist any associations, formally-established groups, or more or less informal spaces, specifically catering to ‘queer South Asians’ in Italy, unlike what happens, instead, in contexts with longer and structurally different South Asian diasporic histories like the U.K. and the U.S. (see e.g., Bhardwaj, 2022; Das Gupta, 2006; Dasgupta and Mahn, 2023; Gopinath, 2005; Mahn, Dasgupta, and DJ Ritu, 2025; Puar, 2008). Predictably, the realms of artistic and cultural production, too, – again, rather prosperous in places like Britain and North America (see e.g., Gopinath, 2015) – in Italy seem to be struggling to emerge, with a few significant exceptions that have started to blossom, however, only recently³³. In addition to all this, the preliminary research that I had conducted for the writing of my M.A. thesis did offer some instructive glimpses into another element that would later repeatedly come to pervade my PhD research practice: i.e., the

³³ I am thinking specifically of Saif ur Rahman Raja’s book *Hijra*, edited by Fandango in 2024, which – however limiting this system of categorization might be – represents the first ever memoir/auto-fiction book, published in Italy and in the Italian language, to explicitly deal with the experiences of growing-up as a gay, Muslim, brown, Pakistani ‘immigrant’ in Italy, after having reached the country through family reunification as a pre-teen.

cloak of invisibility and elusiveness that seems to surround both ‘queerness’ and the realm of the sexual more broadly in Italy’s numerous and variegated South Asian diasporic formations and chains of migration³⁴. If one weaves together these initial considerations concerning the specificities of the context where this research took place, with broader reflections on the extent to which the realms of queerness tout court (Muñoz, 1996; 2019; Cvetkovich, 2003) and of transnational migrants’ self-narratives (Triulzi, 2020) are both shaped by a certain tendency to drift towards un-archivability, ephemerality, and elusiveness, one can begin to grasp how much construction and co-construction had to go into the making of this research’s field(s)³⁵. With this, neither do I want to imply that the South Asian social and cultural configurations that have been emerging in places like the U.K. and North America represent a more advanced step in a temporal scale of diasporic development, which Italy should aim to reach; nor that visibility and/or community-formation along the joined lines of ‘queerness’ and ‘South-Asianness’ must constitute an ideal to which to aspire. Rather, I simply want to clarify what it was that I found in front of me when I began to conduct this research – at first glance: not much –, as a way to introduce the moves that I had to make to ethically co-construct, together with participants, all the micro-fields across which this research eventually developed. Ultimately, it was a scenario that depended much on Italy’s peculiar histories of South Asian immigration, unaddressed legacies of colonialism, racism, contemporary migration politics, lgbt+ activism and community-formation, among other things; as on the positionality from which I personally looked for, and at, these research fields; as well as, additionally and crucially, on the ethical and political posture that I consciously assumed to perform the looking in the first place. Exactly like im/mobility, in/visibility, too, is a deeply relational and thus always relative dimension. If something remained invisible and/or inaccessible to me throughout the course of this research – as many things, no doubt, did – this obviously does not imply that said ‘thing’ (or person, or narrative, or dynamic) did not exist in the first place. Always keeping this last point in mind, I will now move on to assess more closely the quality of constructiveness that went into the making of the fields of this research, and that developed across several levels: a practical, a relational, and an emotional one. These, in turn, did not exist separately but informed each other all the time.

³⁴ Both concepts of in/visibility and elusiveness will be further problematized later in the dissertation. At this initial stage of the discussion, I just want to underline their relational, rather than absolute, nature: whatever remained invisible and elusive to me throughout this research, doesn’t necessarily have to be so in relation to the gaze of others.

³⁵ Even though it definitely played a part in how I engaged with both data and the fields at large, I also want to stress the importance not to over-emphasize the role of ephemerality throughout this research. Just as concepts of im/mobility and in/visibility are deeply relational and relative, so is ephemerality. Romanticizing and essentializing it as intrinsic to either/both queerness or/and migration would risk, among other things, reproducing problematic discourses of research as recuperation, and of the research ‘object’ as a subject-effect, which Anjali Arondekar (2009; 2020) has so brilliantly called out and criticized in her works. More in-depth and context-sensitive critical apprehensions of ephemerality and/or absences in relation to the performance of gender/sexual defiance by South Asian migrants in Italy will be repeatedly picked up throughout the ethnographic sections of this thesis.

Practically speaking, I began the first phase of the long process of field-construction by trying to locate potential participants. I initially did so by turning to selected Italian lgbt+ associations, which, among their activities, included the provision of some form of services specifically catering to the needs and requests of lgbt+ migrants, asylum claimants, and/or racialized people. The initial plan was to locate the first participants through the associations' help, and to then broaden the research reach through the activation of snowball sampling techniques (Parker, Scott, and Geddes, 2019). On the one hand, this choice was dictated by the practical difficulty of finding potential participants by myself: not appearing to be a well-established, widely connected, and/or particularly visible collectivity of individuals, I was not sure where and how else to start looking for South Asian people in Italy who either identified with one (or more) of the letters of the by now ubiquitous lgbtqia+ acronym, or who presented any level of defiance of sexual and/or gender norms. On the other hand, I hoped that by turning to explicitly lgbt+ marked spaces I could get in touch with people potentially more willing to discuss their experiences of 'queerness' and migration with me. I began this operation of networking and recruiting from Rome, the place that I had initially planned to be the geographical field of reference for this research. The rationale behind this decision was two-fold: first of all, being home to large and long-established diasporic communities from the South Asian region (especially from Bangladesh; e.g., see Pompeo, 2011; Priori, 2012a; 2012b), I thought that Rome could ideally provide a fertile and relatively confined setting where to conduct ethnographic fieldwork; secondly, being the place where I had always been based, I imagined that choosing it as my main research ground would make the conduction of fieldwork activities easier in practical terms. And yet, when I realized that I was struggling to identify participants who fitted the required 'criteria' for joining the project and who were living in Rome or its vicinity, I decided to broaden the research scope to other Italian contexts as well. Starting from December 2022, I directly reached out to a total of six large mainstream lgbt+ associations located all across Italy, which, among their services and activities, specifically provided varied forms of support to migrant and/or racialized people³⁶. Thanks to the help of a national delegate of ArciGay (i.e., Italy's biggest and most well-known lgbt+ association), I also distributed an online call for participation to all the local ArciGay branches situated throughout the Italian peninsula. Finally, I individually got in touch with a number of social workers, former volunteers, and researchers interested in lgbt+ migrations in the Italian context, asking for their suggestions and, when possible, their mediation for reaching potentially apt participants for this work. These attempts yielded extremely different responses. The national call for participation was met with no answer whatsoever. Similarly, some of the associations never replied to my emails. In some cases, I managed

³⁶ I stopped at these six when I managed to send the call through the national secretary of Arcigay, given that the call itself was forwarded to all the Arcigay-associated groups present in the Italian territory.

to establish some forms of contact with these groups much later on during research, while in other instances this simply turned out not to be possible. A few other associations, after having shown initial interest, ended up not following up on our conversations, or not being able to actually help. In several cases, it was my specific interest in people coming from the South Asian region to restrict my access to the associations' potential as gatekeepers, given the fact that most of them happened to work mostly with people coming from other areas of the world, such as African or South American countries³⁷. The most fruitful and long-standing collaboration to come out of these chains of networking was the one that I managed to build with The Rainbow Hub³⁸, a Rome-based organization, hosting a *sportello intercultura* (lit. 'interculturality counter'): a weekly space offering free-of-cost support to lgbt+ migrant, racialized, and/or foreign people, who either reach out to the association autonomously, or are directed to it by reception centers or other facilities for migration management. The Rainbow Hub's social workers were the first ones to reply to my emails, agree to meet me in person, and to eventually trust me enough to let me cooperate with them, both for my research work and beyond it, as a volunteer cultural and linguistic mediator from the Hindi and Urdu languages to Italian, and vice-versa. As such, they were also the ones who put me in touch with some of the people who would later turn out to be key participants of this project, and whose life and migration stories will occupy the majority of this thesis.

Taken together, these operations allowed me to engage – to various degrees, with several purposes, and with significantly different outcomes – with a total of about thirty people, roughly classifiable as follows (see Swain and King, 2022, pp. 8-9): primary/key participants; peripheral participants, i.e., participants that I have engaged with less systematically and more sporadically; non-participants, i.e., potential participants who crossed my path but whom I couldn't, or decided not to, include in research; and, finally, informants, i.e., people who provided their informed point of view rather than an account of their life-stories, social workers and members of associations that offer support to lgbt+ migrants, and other researchers working on lgbt+ migrations. Among them, the number of actual participants, both primary and peripheral, ended up amounting to ten people. Even though I am aware of the charges of limitedness (see Small, 2009) that the laying bare of this figure might draw on me, I weighed the choice not to further broaden the research scope carefully.

Mine was, first of all, a practical decision, based on the objective difficulty that I encountered in recruiting interlocutors, on the satisfactory texture and thickness of the data generated by my engagements with such a group of people, however small, as well as on my own individual capacity to

³⁷ This is reflected also by the academic literature available on the topic of lgbt+ migrations to Italy. See, for example, the work done by anthropologist Dany Carnassale on Senegalese gay and bisexual men in Italy (2013; 2021a; 2021b; 2023), or the ethnography on Brazilian *travesti* migrants in Europe (including in Italy) by Julieta Vartabedian (2018).

³⁸ The name of the association has been changed to protect participants' privacy.

interact with each individual person with all the care and presence of mind that I deemed necessary. At the end of July, 2024, after roughly one year and a half of intermittent fieldwork, and concomitantly with the overlapping of a couple of particularly intense research episodes, I reached a point of emotional – even more so than of data – saturation (see Braun and Clarke, 2021 for a critical discussion of data saturation itself), and I thus decided to stop actively looking for other people to involve in the project. As fate would have it, I actually ended up meeting two other important participants only after having taken that decision. However, with the exception of such serendipitous encounters, I did not purposefully work towards further expanding the research reach beyond that point. Even more crucially on this regard, not only did I ‘end up’ involving no more than ten participants in the whole research; I ultimately also decided to write the present ethnography about four of them, rather than about all ten: about the four of them, that is to say, with whom I had managed to engage the most, and the most deeply, all throughout my fieldwork endeavors.

Besides their undeniably practical undertones, both the choice not to strive to include in research a necessarily high number of participants, as well as to concentrate the writing on an even more limited portion of them, are to be coterminously understood also as consciously-taken ethical and political resolutions: as choices, that is to say, that have less to do with the nature of the fields in and of themselves – albeit the latter did, no doubt, played a relevant role –, than with the overall posture that I chose to assume the moment I started looking at (queer) migration as a theme of research. In a time and place such as 2020s Italy, where those who get lumped together under the banner of ‘migrants/immigrants’ get constantly stripped of their humanness by way of being reduced to bare figures to be reluctantly counted, sorted, managed, and dealt with (Fontanari, 2019, p. 7), I made a point of refusing such an enumerative logic by consciously adopting what Sandro Mezzadra (2001; 2004) and Italian tradition of militant research more broadly (Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, pp. 83-85; Fontanari, 2019; Garella and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2013b; Pinelli, 2017, pp. 11-15) theorize as a subjectivity-centered approach to the study of transnational migrations³⁹. Crucially, this does not mean reducing migratory trajectories to journeys enacted by hyper-agentive individuals, who elude the structural workings of power by means of their hybrid, rootless, nomadic, transgressive, and/or translocal positionalities (see Cresswell, 2006, pp. 42-56) – a naïve epistemological drift that looms ever larger, I fear, when the people on the move happen to also embody other, more literal, dimensions of trans-ness and ‘queerness’, as it is the case with this project (see Mai and King, 2009, pp. 297-298). Quite the opposite, the point behind such an approach lies exactly in adopting a conception of subjectivity “which oscillates between the subject as subjected by power and the subject as imbued with the power to transcend

³⁹ Additionally, and very much crucially, as noted by Adrian Favell (2007, p. 271), “[t]he way by which collectivities manage movers (by counting them and naming them) is the fundamental way in which the territorial nation-state society constitutes itself in the first place.”

the processes of subjection that have shaped it” (Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, p. 83). To me, this attentiveness translated also in a conscious disregard of the importance of numbers when it came to the people whom I managed to involve in research, in favor of, instead, an approach which valued the “irreducible singularity” (Mezzadra, 2001, ‘Introduzione, 2.’, my translation) embodied by each and every individual participant – the latter, again, always understood as the meeting ground between individual desires and aspirations, on the one hand, and institutional discourses and regulations, on the other; between being a subject and being subject-ed (see Butler, 1999).

Finally, I was further aided in this decision by a relevant and diverse set of ethnographic literature where the depth of analysis is not dependent at all on the number of the people involved (see Biehl, 2013; Crapanzano, 1980; Desjarlais, 2003; Kanaaneh, 2023), as well as by critical methodological reflections on sample sizes, representativity, generalizability, and expectations of ‘scientificity’ in social sciences research more broadly (see, e.g., Small, 2009). After all, as I have already amply made clear earlier on (see Introduction), my aim with this research never was to restore a representative and comprehensive image of migrant/diasporic South Asian queerness in Italy (see Carminati, 2018). In fact, I do not even believe that an image of this sort exists, in such terms, in the first place. Rather, I wanted to delve in-depth into a set of individual and subjective narratives and experiences – no matter how diverse and limited in number – as a way to reflect on, and acknowledge, the value of some of the possible declinations and nuances that politics, representations, and embodiments of ‘queer’ ‘migrant’ im/mobilities in contemporary Italy can take up. Additionally, I wanted to do so through what I have been terming here an ‘area-sensitive’ lens⁴⁰: a heuristic tool that I exclusively employ to better be able to grasp some of the specificities and complexities of participants’ trajectories of gender and/or sexuality in migration, thus hopefully minimizing the risk of reducing participants themselves to blank slates upon which ‘queerness’ has to be inscribed, from scratch, only after their migratory journey ‘West’ is completed. Eventually, each and every person who crossed my path throughout these past years of research, and irrespective of whether or not they ended up formally participating and being written about in the pages of this thesis – I am thus referring to a group of people much larger than four, if numbers are something that I really cannot get away with –, contributed, in one way or another, to shape the optics and contents of this work, the strategies that I have employed to move through the field, and the movements towards participants that I did or did not make⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Hence, the focus on South Asia: see Introduction.

⁴¹ In addition to those people that I have engaged with but ended up not involving in research, whom I have already mentioned above, this group mentioned above includes also all those other individuals that I have heard of in the stories and narratives of participants, but that, for one reason or another, I never got to meet: friends, family members, ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, lovers, hook-ups, travel companions, social workers, camp guests, and more. All of them together constitute a sort of ‘ghostly’ presence in these pages, that nonetheless plays a role in participants’ lives and thus, indirectly, also in this work.

As the discussion already started to give away, then, the operations aiming at involving participants in research predictably did not result in the identification of either a broad and connected collectivity of people, or of a cohesive and bounded ‘field’ that I could simply access and spend consistent and uninterrupted periods of time in. Quite the contrary, they ended up facilitating my connection with a small but extremely diverse group of subjects, who did ‘fit’ the criteria for participation in the project, without, however, forming a proper ‘community’ of sorts, neither in spatial, relational, nor in identitarian terms. Borrowing again from Vered Amit’s words, this meant that the present research could not – and, as I have already anticipated, did not really want to – attend to “a concept that traditionally has been as, if not more crucial than place for locating their [the anthropologists’] field: the habitus of collectivity” (2000, p. 15). Such an open defiance of the habitus of collectivity becomes particularly evident when looking more closely at the people who eventually ended up taking part in this research: first of all, they were mostly isolated individuals with respect to one another (in most of the cases complete strangers to each other; more rarely, distant acquaintances); they were scattered all across Italy (especially in central, northern and north-eastern areas), where they lived in different housing situations (CAS or SAI facilities⁴², rented rooms, friends’ houses, temporary shelters); they came from several zones of the South Asian region (mostly located in Pakistan and Bangladesh), where they enjoyed sensibly different social and class positionalities; they had disparate migratory backgrounds, histories, and statuses (asylum claimant, refugee, former-minor joining a family member, student); and, finally, they embodied a vast array of gendered and sexual dis/identifications (gay/homosexual, bisexual, she-male, transgender, transman, queer, straight man who has sex with other men, none of the above, more than one of the above at once), with the relevant commonality that all of them, except for one, were assigned male at birth, and were raised Muslim⁴³. In other words, this level of heterogeneity and lack of cohesiveness is one that unveils the pervasiveness of what Willem Schinkel (2018, p. 9) terms *confiction*: “the fiction of a ‘with’, a togetherness”, that ideas such as that of a ‘migrant community’ – in this case, a supposedly ‘queer South Asian migrant community in Italy’ – are invested with. Instead, given the fragmented nature of this assemblage of individuals, rather than it forming a homogeneous, geographically-bounded collectivity, it was each participant in their own right to give way, each time, to a singular microcosm of research: one that I

I want to thank my friend and colleague Valentina Barnabei for sharing an extremely lucid formulation of similar considerations of presence-in-absence with reference to her own doctoral research and thesis-writing process, thus helping me rethink this component of my work in such terms.

⁴² For a more in-depth explanation of what CAS and SAI reception facilities are, of the differences between the two, as well as of the overall workings of the Italian reception system for migrants and refugees, see further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

⁴³ These data reflect the overall composition of both Pakistani and Bangladeshi migration to Italy, which, to this day, are characterized by two of the highest levels of ‘gender’ imbalance among all the communities present in the Italian territory (Ministero del Lavoro, 2023a; 2023c).

attempted to deeply, albeit intermittently, approach for longer or shorter periods of time, and with greater or less ease, depending on each specific case. Hence, the research ground that I traversed for the conduction of this work could not be understood and treated as an ‘immersive’ field in the more properly ethnographic sense of the term, but rather as an entangled web of individual and personal relationships between researcher and participant, which was constantly being made and unmade as each research interaction occurred and evolved, stopped and resumed⁴⁴.

Multiple factors contributed to shape the formation of this research network, the conditions of access to it, and the methodological choices that I had to make while navigating it. Geographical distance undoubtedly played a primal role in either helping to develop or hindering this complex entanglement of relationalities. Having conducted research mostly while being based in Rome, engagement with participants living in other areas of Italy was more sparse, more intermittent, and, overall, more difficult. Rome, on the other hand, provided a much more fruitful research field, not so much in terms of numbers, as for the thickness of the research relationalities that it hosted and facilitated⁴⁵. Another crucial factor in the determination of fieldwork ‘failures’ and ‘successes’ was, quite simply, the everyday life of people in migration, both in and of itself and in relation to my own. Most of the people that I have worked with lead rather mobile and precarious lives, interspersed by intense and ever-changing working schedules, unpostponable institutional appointments, sometimes abrupt changes of residence, and omnipresent long and uncertain waits – be they for asylum outcomes, documents, work opportunities, access to courses or new housing solutions; but also, much sought-after romance and relationships. Thus, simply being able to find the right time slots to visit them and spend some days together – i.e., to lay the basic foundation for fieldwork conduction itself – was often a challenge, and among the most insidious ones that I had to tackle. Time constraints were also accompanied by space limitations: most participants lived in what they referred to as ‘camps’ (i.e., either CAS or SAI facilities, depending on the person’s migratory status), where they shared a room with one or more other guests, and where access to outsiders was not always allowed by the camp rules, nor, in some cases, wanted by participants themselves. My own personal and academic life, too,

⁴⁴ I want to stress that this does not imply that participants lived isolated lives. In fact, the majority of them consistently shared several levels of ties both with co-nationals, other migrants, as well as other lgbt+ people (both Italian and non-Italian). However, in most of the cases, I only managed to spot glimpses of such complex webs of relationality without being able to properly access them, for disparate reasons that I will account for in the rest of the work, but that cannot be told apart from my positionality and, even more crucially, from participants’ perceptions and constructions of my positionality. Some of these networks will enter this thesis, while some others won’t, and for the only reason that my engagement with them remained too partial for me to say something meaningful about them.

⁴⁵ As I will explore more in-depth later, I managed to keep working consistently with one key participant in Rome, Atif, while also engaging in research and research-adjacent activities there, mostly as a volunteer cultural mediator at The Rainbow Hub. Crucially enough, in the case of Atif, Rome, too, ended up becoming a research participant in and of itself: as we constantly traversed its streets and neighborhoods, and lingered around its restaurants, fast-foods and shops, Rome itself became an active component of Atif’s relationality with me, and a rather productive one in terms of research. I will explore all of these dynamics in Chapter Two, Section 2.3., and in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.

played into this complex game of constantly-sought-after but often-missed encounters. Rather than being attributable to participants alone, both time and space limitations resulted in fact from the convergence – more often than not, the clash – between participants’ multiple levels of im/mobility and my own’s. In several instances, it was my practice of doing research ‘at home’, for a long stretch of time, and without the physical separation entailed by going ‘abroad’ for fieldwork, to have undoubtedly inhibited some of my movements towards participants – or, at least, to have made them stiffer and less spontaneous – as ‘home’ often caught-up on me faster than research did. This whole scenario eventually contributed to the structuring of this work as what anthropologists Gökçe Günel and Chika Watanabe (2023) term a “patchwork ethnography”, rather than as a full-fledged immersive ethnography in classic anthropological fashion. The idea of a patchwork ethnography was developed at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe, 2020) and expanded shortly after (Günel and Watanabe, 2023) to reflect on, and make sense of, the increasing sense of impossibility experienced by many researchers, when still expected to conduct ‘traditional’ ethnographic fieldwork in the face of all the additional burdens that academic and non-academic life in late-capitalism pushes onto them⁴⁶. The solution that the authors propose is one pending in favor of “*writing with rather than against* the disruptions that might characterize anthropological research projects” (2023, p. 131, emphasis added) in the contemporary academy, thus incorporating those same disruptions into the fabric of research itself, rather than hopelessly trying to fight and resolve them. Here in this work, I intend to do the same. At the same time, I also take the liberty to further stretch the original formulation of patchwork ethnography, so that it can encompass and account for not only the ‘burdens’ that weighed me – the researcher – down, but also those affecting the lives of participants themselves, as well as the entire web of relational im/mobilities which resulted from the coming together of both researcher and participants’ lives.

Turning now to an assessment of more relational and emotional levels of field-construction, a significant and related element that has to be taken into account is the caution that I tended to adopt before entering each microcosm of research. This caution was informed, first and foremost, by the awareness of the potential ‘disruption’ that my mere presence could provoke in the mundanity of participants’ lives – a disruption which could be more or less hard to manage, both for them and for me. As I have soon come to realize, the mere fact that I was the one to move to reach participants’ places of residence for limited periods of time – and thus to carry what was often perceived by participants’ themselves to be a certain ‘burden’ of mobility – often translated into an implicit and self-imposed pressure on them to make room for me in their busy schedules, and/or to accommodate me

⁴⁶Among the burdens enumerated by the authors figure “neoliberal university labor conditions, expectations of work-life balance, environmental concerns, feminist and decolonial critiques”, as well as “[f]amily obligations, precarity, other hidden, stigmatized, or unspoken factors—and most recently COVID-19” (Günel and Watanabe, 2023, p. 131).

in the most various ways possible, sometimes at the cost of their own ‘wellbeing’. On top of that, being seen around with a white Italian woman, who had shown up quite literally out of nowhere, was often cause of curiosity and questions from the people – mostly men – that made up my interlocutors’ social circles, in the often small and confined Italian provincial realities that they were living in. In order to manage these disruptions caused by my presence and to preserve their different levels of secrecy and outness regarding their sexuality, participants had to make up stories about me and what I was doing with them, investing me of multiple, more or less fictitious identities in the process (see Rose, 1997)⁴⁷. My presence created a disruption also in the sense that once I became a character in people’s lives through research, it wasn’t always possible, easy, or, in some cases, even desirable, not to let this relationality go beyond the strict researcher-participant binary. The boundary between research relationality, volunteer work, and personal attachment was not always an easy one to draw (see Burger et al., 2024, on the concept of “ethnographic multi-sidedness”), and this blurriness came with consequences and responsibilities that paradoxically both facilitated research, and complicated it at the same time. In this sense, the disruption was never one-sided: participants, too, affected the regular course of my own life in ways that were not always easy to predict, spot, and/or make sense of in writing. In fact, I would say now, the impact that participants’ presence had on me affected my life more than my presence and/or coming and going affected theirs. In some cases, this relational messiness facilitated the consolidation of research relationalities in ways that proved essential for the development of this project⁴⁸. In others, however, a certain level of unwanted ambiguity turned out to be problematic, as in those instances where people assumed that they could ‘use’ their participation in this project to attempt to advance some further, more personal motives, such as the pursuit of an intimate relationship with me. In some occasions, these misunderstandings were so thorny to manage that I ended up taking the decision to exclude participants from joining this research⁴⁹. These incidents

⁴⁷ In some cases, these new identities resulted simply from omission, such as when I became a researcher studying Bangladeshi refugees in Italy, without the ‘lgbt+’ part; other times, they turned out to be more substantial, instead. In one occasion, for instance, I became a participant’s ‘depressed friend’ who was coming to visit all the way from Rome because she needed the extra company and support.

⁴⁸ This was the case, for example, of the three people who grew to become the key participants in this research, Atif, Shanto, and Sam (pseudonyms). With them, I’ve managed to maintain long-lasting and layered relationships, which started as strictly research-related, but ended up going beyond the boundaries of the interview and the fieldwork notes. And this positive ambiguity was exactly what allowed me to catch glimpses of several dynamics of ‘queerness’ and/in migration, which I would not have been able to grasp had I not engaged with them also beyond the formal realm of research.

⁴⁹ One participant wanted ‘to be kissed’ (these were roughly his words) in exchange of an interview; another, after spending a few days in my company, attempted to ask me to become his girlfriend. To me, the problematic nature of such interactions lied less in their emergence per se – after all, both researchers and participants are sexual beings, who can at times find themselves experiencing unpredictable desires and feelings –, than in the unbalanced power dynamics that they gave rise to. For one thing, they were unidirectional. Secondly and consequently, they uncovered the different conceptions of research that were being mobilized in the relationality between these two specific participants and me: while I was interpreting each interaction always in terms of, and through, the lens of research – notwithstanding the fact that, with time, the researcher-participant relationality could also acquire additional layers of, for example, friendship and volunteer support, as it did in some cases – for these participants this reality was not necessarily clear, and they came to mis-interpret

were not the only times I consciously decided not to include potentially ‘apt’ subjects into this work. Especially through my collaboration with The Rainbow Hub, I crossed paths with several people who potentially fitted the criteria for participation. However, when their particularly fragile or uncertain living arrangements, psychological conditions, and/or migratory statuses constituted a way too big of an obstacle for the conduction of ethically-sound research, I decided to interact with them only as a volunteer, rather than as a volunteer-researcher. Lastly, in a couple of more cases, people simply refused to participate in the project with their stories, and either preferred to just provide their viewpoint as informants, or not to engage in research at all.

The multiple operations that came to constitute what I’ve been referring to as ‘field construction’, and that I have now retraced in these pages, did not occupy the first few months of research alone, but rather stretched out well into the very last year of my PhD. Starting off from participants’ recruitment, they encompassed later stages of the work, too, when, once it was established, researcher-participant relationality had to be carefully built and maintained, through much emotional and practical labor from both researcher and participants’ alike. Predictably, this labor of co-construction also shaped the methodological choices and directions (plural) that this research had to negotiate and eventually take. It is to an analysis of them that I now turn.

1.3. Constructing the Field(s): Methodologies

Such a fragmented field configuration inevitably impacted the methodological choices that I had to make all throughout this research – choices which, in most of the cases, could not simply comprise of ‘immersion’ alone. As thoroughly analyzed by Amit (2000, pp. 15-16), doing research outside/beyond the previously mentioned habitus of collectivity, and through constantly-mobile and unstable relationalities, poses a whole array of dilemmas to established practices of fieldwork conduction:

Episodic, occasional, partial and ephemeral social links pose particular challenges for ethnographic field-work. How do we observe interactions that happen sometimes but not necessarily when we are around? How do we participate in social relations that are not continuous, that are experienced most viscerally in their absence? How do we participate in or observe practices that are enacted here and there, by one or a few? How do we take into account unique events that may not be recurring but may still have irrevocable consequences [...]? Where do we

my own purposes as directly aiming to the realms of romance and/or intimacy. That, together with both participants’ complex histories and presents of (sexual) trauma, brought me to temporarily step back from these interactions. After engaging in not always comfortable, yet necessary conversations with both, in one case a more clearly-bounded relationality was re-established. In the other, however, I failed to do so and thus stopped trying to engage said participant in research out of ethics-related concerns.

To better contextualize these micro-episodes in a broader discussion on anthropologists themselves as sexual beings, and on the impact that anthropologists’ own sexual and erotic subjectivities can have on fieldwork conduction, see Kulick, and Wilson, 1995.

‘hang out’ when the processes which we are studying produce common social conditions or statuses [...] but not necessarily coterminous collectivities? To cope with these conditions, it may not be sufficient or possible for anthropologists to simply join in. They may have to purposively create the occasions for contacts that might well be as mobile, diffuse and episodic as the processes they are studying.

I could not, in fact, “simply join in”, and an analogous imperative to create “mobile, diffuse and episodic” “occasions for contacts” (ibid.) lied at the very methodological core of this research, too. As I have already anticipated in the previous section, among the first and hardest challenges I had to tackle, both in practical terms, and from an ethical, methodological, and emotional point of view, there was that of constantly having to negotiate and find the right time, place, and modality to properly engage with each participant – in other words, the challenge of laying the very first basis for the two-fold operation of fieldwork construction and conduction itself. However, this was but the first of several other methodological dilemmas that traversed this research. For one thing, once established, contact with participants – no matter how intermittent and temporary – had to be built and kept alive for the research relationality to actually develop, and for any sort of ‘data’ to be generated through that relationality itself. And secondly, these same co-constructed and relationally-generated data had to somehow be gathered, collected and stored – archived, in a way –, if the crucial successive phases of analysis, thematization, and, eventually, writing were to happen. It is exactly at these junctures that a whole other set of issues formed: one that I had both to negotiate while facing it throughout fieldwork conduction, and also make sense of during later phases of thematization and data analysis. In the following pages, I will thus proceed to account for the most pressing and recurring questions that impacted the methodological apparatus of the present work.

1.3.1. Making the Most of the Impossibility of Immersion

For one thing, the already mentioned impossibility and/or unsuitability of immersion resulted in a much more sporadic and diffuse network of contacts with most of my interlocutors, whereby each encounter could be followed by weeks, if not months, of no in-person meeting. This undoubtedly mined the thickness of the data generated in the field, but at the same time triggered an emphasized effort towards what could be defined as the labor of care – one of many, actually⁵⁰ – underlying this research project: that is, an ever-present attention towards maintaining the researcher-participant relationality alive, even at a distance, and even when in-person contacts proved difficult or impossible

⁵⁰ I locate this research’s primary and most significant labor of care in the effort of every single person who, during these years, contributed to put me in touch with potential participants, devoted some of their time to listen to me, or managed to give me tips, feedbacks, and suggestions, most of the time out of pure and selfless generosity. This includes professors, researchers, fellow PhD students, social workers, friends, and, obviously, participants themselves. To all of them goes my deepest gratitude, as research simply could not have happened without their support.

to arrange. Practically speaking, this meant attempting to informally engage with participants outside the ‘field’, through messages, video-calls, and phone-calls, as well as through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, less as an alternative way to generate narratives to later analyze in research, than as a tool to maintain alive the thread of relationality flowing between us. The contents of these conversations and online engagements ended up in research as ‘data’ in and of themselves only when conceived from the outset as proper research encounters, and/or when consent to do so was explicitly granted to me by participants. This was the case, for example, of several online informative conversations and, subsequently, interviews, that I carried out during the very initial stages of research as tools to introduce my work to participants, to submit to them the consent form to join the project, and to start to get to know each other before actually meeting in person. In numerous other occasions, however, these exchanges occurred in much more spontaneous and unplanned ways, and were conceived by participants themselves as spaces located outside a more strictly research-related relationality. In a couple of instances, people outright asked me not to include the contents of such conversations in this thesis, as they felt that they constituted moments of intimate confession destined to remain unaccounted for, more than anything else. In such cases, too, however, what eventually ended up *not* being included in writing contributed to shape the contents and the optics of this work, just as much as every other narrative, encounter, and research experience.

When in person encounters did happen, I made sure to tap into as many avenues and modalities of research as possible, in order to make the most out of the often relatively limited field engagement that I was managing to carve out. Practically speaking, this meant engaging not only with participants’ narratives, but also with everything else that surrounded these narratives in the first place. I am referring in particular to two sets of extra-narrative dimensions that came to rest at the heart of this research: place and movement. As it will be further explored later on in this chapter, the two of them got activated on the levels of both content and methodology. Simply put, on the one hand, place and movement – the latter, ranging in scale from the smallest bodily gesture, to the act itself of relocating transnationally – would constantly come up as recurring topics of conversation brought up by participants themselves (as in: when talking about the role played by specific bodily movements in clocking them as ‘non-normative’ subjects; when expressing a desire to travel and/or to settle in somewhere; or when bringing up the nostalgic memories tied to a specific place back home). On the other, they would also function as more properly methodological tools, through which specific narratives of life in (sexual) migration would be generated and emerge, by either attaching themselves to specific places where research would happen, or by being solicited by emplaced actions such as walking or shopping together.

1.3.2. Doing it Away with the Interview and the Recorder: Conducting Research through Informal Conversations

The difficulty inherent in conducting fieldwork did not stop at finding participants, forming chains of co-relationality, and creating the right chances to engage with them, both in person and online – it did not stop, in other words, at conducting research without, and beyond, proper immersion. Another crucial issue concerned the need to collect the data that were being produced through such sparse and more or less consistent relationalities. As I soon realized, besides being difficult to establish, even when they did eventually occur, research encounters were also not particularly eager to generate easily collectable and thematizable information – whether they were self-narratives, oral histories, memories, anecdotes, or even written records of sorts. By that, I do not mean that people were necessarily reluctant towards sharing their stories with me – some definitely were, but some others proved incredibly open and talkative in that respect, in ways that I had not fathomed before starting fieldwork. What I rather mean is that the ways through which such moments of sharing, narration, and conversation happened tended to escape any easy modality of collection and archiving. In fact, as it is often the case in qualitative research, they tended to happen predominantly *when* and *because* processes of systematic and structured documentation were not in place and/or were, in that specific moment, difficult to enact. Practically speaking, this meant that they emerged outside the confined realm of the research interview – for example, when the interview had just stopped and the recorder had just been switched off, in what Warren et al., 2003, p. 107, define as the “after-the-interview interactional strip”; or, that they briefly made an appearance when a long encounter was winding down and the time to say goodbye had come; or, again, that they flourished in the form of long, unstopable and unrecordable flows of messy conversation and confession, which could last for hours on end. In other words, they emerged through modalities which, in the optics of research, were not at all easy to accurately capture, document, and retain. To shed further light on this recurring struggle affecting the present work, I want to resort to an extract from my own fieldwork diary that I impulsively noted down after a dense but barely-archivable research encounter, which had deeply touched me, but also left me terribly frustrated at the same time:

I’m writing this diary entry a few hours after the meeting [with Sam, pseudonym, research participant], yet I feel like whole chunks of the narrative are already gone from my memory, notwithstanding my attempts to print them in my mind while I was listening to them. Our conversation was so thick, dense of information and – crucially! – informal, that I feel like it’s impossible to make it justice in the pages of this diary. I will thus pin down some of those arguments, observations, and confessions by Sam, that somehow felt more relevant to me and which I thus tried to keep alive in my mind as much as possible. On this occasion, too, I find myself facing the same problem that I have dealt with during other research encounters: the co-construction of an informal conversational setting through which to conduct research – which at the same time tends to blur the rigid boundaries of research itself –

is what allows the emergence of the most significant, rich, and spontaneous narrative interventions by participants. At the same time, this informality – accompanied, and to an extent created by, the absence of a digital recorder put between researcher and participant – makes the documenting of ‘accurate’ and ‘faithful’ data all the more difficult. Even a gesture as simple as taking out a notepad or my phone to write down some keywords, which would facilitate recollection (as well as the reconstruction of the direction of the sense-making process followed by participants), would feel like a betrayal in such a setting. Basically, what allows the narrative to thrive is at the same time what prevents its proper documentation. *Narratability* and *archivability* thus seem to push against each other in a fight that leaves me, the researcher, with the uneasy task of negotiating between the two. This dilemma is so urgent that I sometimes even wonder if it is possible at all to do narrative research with/out a recorder. With it, the narrative flow tends to be altered and/or hindered. Without it, ‘faithful’ documentation is basically impossible (fieldnotes, 11/2023).

Even though now, aided by the benefit of distance, I would probably frame this reflection in different, somewhat less self-centered terms, I still believe that the unfiltered frustration that immediately followed this research meeting manages to capture one fundamental methodological conflict affecting this project: namely, the impossibility for narratability and archivability to fully and fruitfully co-exist. As I was noting in my notes and as I also anticipated earlier, quite often throughout this research, the most spontaneous, rich, and relevant narratives by participants emerged in conversation only when there was seemingly no other possibility of recording them, than for me to attempt to memorize them and, only later, take note of them in my diaries. On the other hand, whenever a recording device was on, and/or a slightly more formal interview setting was put into place, a whole series of ‘unwanted’ effects would follow. In the best-case scenarios, the conversation would get stiffer, more performance-like, and more heavily reliant on a series of tropes about culture, religion, and homo/sexuality in participants’ home-countries, perhaps tied more to participants’ prefiguration of what they thought I wanted to hear from them, than to what they actually had to say. In the worst cases, however, the flow of narration would either stop abruptly – and, sometimes, also rather traumatically for the participant involved – or not start at all in the first place. Notwithstanding my efforts in keeping the potential or actual interview as open and as conversational as possible, by consciously refraining from posing intrusive questions, and by attempting to rely as much as I could on the rationale of the biographic narrative interpretive method (Wengraf, 2001)⁵¹ – i.e., only asking one introductory question about the participant’s life in the first interview, leaving her the freedom to choose what to talk about –, the overall sentiment towards the interview setting would not fundamentally change.

The main driver behind such an open resistance towards the method-interview and the object-recorder can be located, I believe, first and foremost in the themes that this research turns to, and in

⁵¹ I thank Cesare di Felicianantonio for formally introducing me to this specific methodology, which I had already unconsciously and more or less successfully began to use in my research practice before knowing it had been thematized in such terms.

its overall structure: in other words, in the topic of the present work and, consequently, in the ‘kind’ of people it managed to reach and involve. Even though I never restricted access to the project to a specific category of ‘queer’ South Asian people in mobility to Italy, this work eventually managed to reach, for the most part, asylum claimants and/or refugees at the early stages of their migratory journeys. This was, in turn, most probably due to a certain selection bias affecting my research practice, resulting from my involvement with Italian lgbt+ associations as my first and main gatekeepers. In any case, the moment I found myself engaging with people who were passing through the long and tortuous path for the recognition of refugee status on SOGI grounds, or who had recently gone through the system, I inevitably had to take this element into account, also in terms of research practice and methodology. The first victim of such a reconsideration was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the interview-as-method itself. To contribute the most to what eventually became my decision to sideline the interview as a more liminal research tool within this project, in favor of unrecorded informal conversations, was the weight that the interview-as-policy-tool carries within processes of asylum claim⁵². In fact, after filing their asylum application and waiting for a generally long but otherwise unspecified period of time, often lasting for months and months on end, all applicants have to sit with a designated group of authorities – in Italy, taking the name of *Commissione Territoriale* (lit. ‘Territorial Commission’) –, who will listen to their case and adjudicate on it, establishing whether they can be deemed deserving of a form of international protection or not (see Danisi et al., 2021). Referred to in the Italian system as *audizione* (lit. ‘audition’), this crucial moment of the process consists, basically, in an interview. A carefully crafted interview, carried out by authorities often in an inquisitive manner, and with the aim to put to the test the truthfulness of the claimant’s story (see Danisi et al., 2021; Gartner, 2015; Giametta, 2017; Murray, 2016) – all elements that would hopefully not appear in a research interview –, but an interview nonetheless. Being a moment so loaded with power, meaning, and expectations, as well as so deeply entrenched in problematic discourses of claimants’ victimhood and of the authenticity and credibility of their narratives, it only follows that employing an analogous method of narrative-solicitation throughout research, even if in a much more nuanced, relational, and co-constructed way, could prove risky to say the least. Additionally, I also found myself interacting for the most part with people at the first stages of their migratory journeys – either people who had just gotten refugee status, or who were still in the process of claiming it. In such delicate moments, I

⁵² Crucially, my being extra-careful on this point does not depend on the fact that I deem being, or aspiring to be recognized as a refugee something that automatically puts a person into a category of hyper-victimhood and extreme vulnerability, ontologically different from those inhabited by other ‘categories’ of migrants. This work refuses such an understanding of migrant typologies, and explicitly looks at them as performative, politically-productive tools of migration management, more than as descriptors of an objective reality of contemporary transnational migrations (Apostolova, 2015; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Rather, my caution depends on the fact that, on an extremely material terrain, going through the asylum machine often results in being involved in processes of potential further vulnerabilization, which are paradoxically produced by the asylum system itself. The interview/audition is a case in point.

soon realized, it could be hard for a participant to truly tell the institutional interview and the research interview apart from each other, thus risking the re-enactment both of the potentially traumatic and, in any case, life-defining setting of the audition, as well as of that same fixed script that claimants have to abide to during the audition itself. It was often participants themselves who would refuse to engage in a more bounded interview setting, while proving eager to share their stories with abundance and generosity in other more informal contexts, especially if they were still waiting for their *audizione* to be held. In other words, while waiting for their appointment with the Territorial Commission, there was not a lot of additional space in participants' minds to think about much else and, even more so, to engage in structured and formal retellings of their life experiences – and understandably so. Moreover, such a sentiment towards being interviewed did not necessarily change once the audition was over and done with, which further fed into the methodological decision of privileging informal conversations over recorded interviews. The following ethnographic incident involving Atif (for a thorough introduction to Atif story, see Chapter Two) will help clarify what I mean.

A young Pakistani refugee whose identifications blur the boundaries between gay man and transgender woman, Atif is the participant that I worked in closest contact with all throughout this research⁵³. I met her at the very beginning of 2023 through Rome's The Rainbow Hub, when I introduced myself to her as a researcher working on the migration of lgbt+ people from South Asia to Italy, and while also acting as a linguistic and cultural mediator between her and the social workers in the association. After a first few months of getting to know each other in the association, we started meeting regularly outside its locales, roughly once a week. During that whole period, I never interviewed her, nor I attempted to. At the time, she was still waiting for the date of her commission appointment to be set, and her mind was entirely occupied by that thought. She often alluded to the fact that, once that part of her journey would be over, she would be ready to tell me everything I needed to know. I thus decided to wait and stick to more informal and less invasive modalities of research conduction in the meantime. For months, we went out together, shared food, took walks around the city, chatted, went to offices and official appointments together. And all the while I systematically took notes of each of these meetings in my fieldwork diary⁵⁴. Eventually, a little more

⁵³ When I first met Atif, she would mostly refer to herself in the masculine form. With time, she started alternating between the masculine and the feminine forms of Urdu verbs and adjectives, with an increasingly growing preference for the latter, to the point that, at the time of writing, Atif almost exclusively employs the feminine forms – at least when talking to me. As a form of respect towards Atif's current strategies of self-identification, I will thus prefer referring to her in the feminine all throughout this thesis, with the exception of fieldwork excerpts and ethnographic vignettes dating back to earlier moments of fieldwork, and for which the preservation masculine form and/or of the alternation between the two proves relevant for the purposes of the discussion (e.g., when Atif's gender/sexual 'ambiguity' constitutes what is being interrogated or discussed in a given episode).

⁵⁴ Even though I was not formally interviewing Atif throughout that time span, this does not mean that I was conducting research on/with her covertly. On the contrary, I explicitly stated my intents and role from the very outset of our relation-ality, and I periodically made sure that she was aware of my triple role as friend, researcher, and volunteer-translator at the Rainbow Hub.

than a year after our first meeting, I started asking her if she would be ok with me interviewing her for my thesis. At that point, she had already received the positive outcome of her asylum application on grounds of her SOGI, had been shifted to a more comfortable housing arrangement, and we had known each other for a consistent amount of time: the times felt right for me to attempt to make some order in Atif's fragmented story by carrying out a proper biographical interview with her, hopefully without risking re-enacting many of the potential nuisances tied to the interview-as-method mentioned above (e.g., performance of a script, difficulty in telling it apart from the *audizione*). Atif agreed to my proposal rather enthusiastically, but for a series of reason we had to postpone that moment for a few more weeks. When I finally set out to conduct the actual interview, however, after only about eight minutes of talking, Atif got overwhelmed by the traumatic memories she was about to retell me and hastily asked me to turn off the recorder and stop – which I immediately did. Even though I had only asked her to tell me a little bit about herself, and even though she had recounted to me more or less traumatic episodes of her past numerous times before, the somehow more solemn and formal setting of the interview – marked, crucially enough, by the presence of a recorder between us – was enough to trigger Atif's reaction. In a way, however, what stroke me the most about the episode lied less in its abrupt conclusion, than in what was happening before it: Atif had started retelling me her story in a radically different way from how I was used to hearing it, by using the third person to talk about herself, and by relying on a narrative tone which she had never employed during our numerous previous conversations. It was as if she felt that she *had to* enact a specific kind of narrative for me to consider the interview contents valuable enough for research – a narrative which, besides, also inevitably forced her to go through deep-rooted and unspeakable trauma.

I quoted this episode at length here because it represents the case that definitely convinced me of the need to be extra-cautious when planning to incorporate interviews into my methodology, at any stage of research practice whatsoever. It was not, moreover, an isolated case. As I have already discussed, several other times when I tried to set up a more 'conventional' research interaction (e.g., a recorded interview), something happened to participants' narratives: either they drifted away from their personal experience and flew into didactic, lecture-like interactions and discursive tropes, where they tried to teach me things about Pakistani/Bangladeshi 'culture'; they stopped altogether abruptly, or didn't even start in the first place (as in the case of a participant who did not allow me to turn the recorder on); or, again, participants simply found ways to circumvent the interview setting itself, by adding the most relevant detail, the thickest anecdote, or the most insightful reflection only in passing,

just a few minutes before leaving the meeting, and/or when the recorder had been already switched off and put back in its case⁵⁵.

The whole set of issues described above inevitably impacted my practice in the field(s), as well as the methodological choices that I had to make all throughout fieldwork, with the most meaningful decision I took in this sense being that of sidelining interviews (together with the recorder) to a more marginal position within the methodological scheme of this research (see Rutakumwa et al., 2020). In their place, I rather chose to rely, whenever possible, on the more serendipitous possibilities offered by informal unrecorded conversations, and to employ such inputs to then solicit additional, deeper, and more research-oriented layers of narrative myself (Bernard, 2011; Swain and King, 2022). Practically speaking, this meant that I would organize research encounters with participants without necessarily structuring them around the conduction of formal interviews. Rather, I would let participants set the rhythm of the meeting and of our conversation, especially at the initial stages of our relation-ality, limiting myself to (literally) following them around and listening to their stories, as they would come up a little at a time throughout our mutual exchanges. To keep track of what would happen in these micro-fields, I would systematically take note of it all in my fieldwork diaries right after each research encounter. Whenever the situation allowed for it, I would also take quick notes during these conversations and/or scribble down key-words while they were being pronounced by participants, in an attempt to help the subsequent process of recollection. In the vast majority of cases, however, the bulk of the labor of note-taking would happen only at a later time, when I would be back in my room or office, ‘out’ of the field and ‘far’ from the participant’s company (see Swain and King, 2022).

Needless to say, the choice to rely on informal conversations – rather than on semi-structured, recorded interviews – as my go-to qualitative method came with its own set of challenges and limitations. For one thing, I soon had to let go of any aspiration to ‘faithful’, ‘exhaustive’, and ‘proper’ archivability of participants’ words and narratives. This move, in turn, was premised on the need to operate a profound rethinking of what would count as the acceptable core of the collected and analyzable materials of this research – its ‘findings’, ‘data’, or ‘evidence’. Relying on late queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz’s (1996) insights on the realm of the ephemera as the “kind of invisible evidence” which, by virtue of this exact invisibility, elusiveness, and temporariness, constitutes a privileged category of “evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities” (p. 6), I also came to value what Muñoz poetically describes as the “traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things” (p.10), rather than, and/or in addition to, the things themselves: a brief comment left at the end of a meeting; a

⁵⁵ I want to stress the fact that I am aware that this is not negative per se: as I have already clarified, I’m not after the ‘truth’ about participants’ lives, and this mode of slipping into discursive tropes as soon as the recorder is on embodies a dynamic which is just as eloquent as the things that people would tell me while we are eating, walking, or scrolling through our phones together.

repeated gesture; the choice of a specific place where to meet; an oddly recurring anecdote. In other words, mundane, temporary, and often hard-to-collect moments – exceeding the mere realm of narrativity itself, yet forcefully brought back to it by me, in messy and inevitably partial google-doc files, notes apps, slips of paper, notebooks, or more often than not, just the space of my memory –, which would eventually come to constitute the im/material core of this whole patchwork-like (Günel and Watanabe, 2023) im/mobile ethnographic endeavor. Among the most pressing issues implied in this methodological choice were the ones concerning the realm of ethics. As Swain and King (2022) note⁵⁶, conducting narrative research through informality compels researchers to constantly negotiate the so-called micro-ethics of fieldwork – a practice that, in most cases, involves taking in-situ, context-specific decisions, which cannot be predicted nor accounted for in advance. The issue of consent is particularly pressing: while in formally-established interview settings it is relatively easier to understand the boundaries of consent, the same cannot be said about informal conversations that simply ‘happen’ – whether they are unprompted or consciously solicited by researchers – without explicit consent necessarily being declared, granted, and/or renovated each time. To reduce the impact of such ambiguities, I enacted a series of strategies which mired to the implementation of continuous informed consent, be it explicit or implicit (Klykken, 2021): I would non-invasively but periodically remind participants of my role (also) as researcher – something that could quite easily get lost in the web of relationalities that made up this research’s fields; I would pay attention the signals that would give me confirmation of participants’ awareness of my work as researcher, as well as to their cues and inputs as to what to include and what to leave out of research; and finally, when in doubt, I would simply and directly ask them, thus involving participants themselves in the process of findings-elaboration (see also Di Felicianantonio, 2021 on the un/ethical boundaries of social sciences research and the limits of hyper-bureaucratized assessments of ethics).

At this point, a clarification is due: here, I do not want to claim that these interactions with participants, borne out of informality rather than from a more bounded interview-like exchange, yielded somehow ‘purer’ or ‘more authentic’ narratives, than those generated, instead, by interviews. If anything, both informal and formal conversations constitute the result of a process of co-construction which equally involves participants and researcher, as well as being both liable to similar sets of limitations: people can lie, play a part, be elusive, misremember, and omit, during both interviews *and* informal conversations alike (Swain and King, 2022)⁵⁷. What I rather wanted to stress throughout

⁵⁶ I am grateful to my friend and colleague Martina Benigni for sharing this precious paper with me.

⁵⁷ Besides, going back for a moment to the dimension of the goals of this research, the aim was never to strive for the ‘truth’ of participants’ experience of ‘queerness’ in migration (see Sermijn, Devlieger and Loots, 2008, p. 638) – I leave to asylum authorities the onus of handling this impossible, if not actually violent, task, as well all the ethical dilemmas that (should) come with it. Its main aim was, rather, to interact with whatever narratives – of their lives, of their gendered and sexual selves, of their migratory journeys – people decided to construct and enact in the specific relationality that the

this portion of the discussion was, simply enough, how both the method-interview and the object-recorder produced a series of effects, that brought me to reconsider their viability as suitable methodological tools for the specific and unique case of this research alone, rather than their inadequacy as research methods tout court. After all, as David Murray (2016, ‘Chapter 1: Conclusion’, emphasis added) points out when discussing his own methodological choices for engaging with SOGI claimants and refugees across the Canadian asylum system, “[k]eeping in mind the effects of power dynamics within the interview and ethnographic encounter reminds us that *all narratives* are stories told and received in highly mediated ways, which in turn reminds us of the limits of the narrative as a research method and form of knowledge” (see also Langellier, 1999).

Perhaps not by chance, then, two extra-narrative dimensions kept on surfacing quite consistently throughout these interactions, otherwise based off of primarily informal conversation: place and movement. As I started to gradually realize that the places where, and the movements through which, participants’ narratives were emerging ‘mattered’ just as much as, if not more than, their narratives in and of themselves, I found myself paying closer attention to what Jon Anderson (2004, p. 257) describes as “the opportunity to harness the co-ingredience of humans and place to explore knowledge constructions through a socio-spatial methodology”. In simpler terms, I found myself looking at the movements and moorings that participants had been involving me in during our meetings, as the basis from which to begin to “harness the power of place in [my] methodology” (ibid.). Anne-Lene Sand, Helle Marie Skovbjerg and Lene Tanggaard (2022) have more recently formulated a similar strategy for the activation of place as a methodological tool in interview-based narrative research, in terms of “sensory *a-where-ness*” (p. 597). This, too, became a parallel methodological component for the present work, notwithstanding the specificity of their proposal in reference to interview interactions, and the peripheral role that interviews played in my research, instead. This whole move towards place, movement, and non-movement was possible and productive, first and foremost, because the relationship between the people and the places of this research was a productive one to begin with. According to Anderson’s (2004, p. 256) perspective – in turn based off his reading of Casey (2000; 2001) – this is something that systematically happens because of the aforementioned coingredience tying together humans and places tout court (see further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1.). The places of this research thus stopped being a mere background – they never were one to be begin with, according to this optic – to rather become both an integral product *and* producer of human action, meaning-making, and memory-retrieval, throughout and beyond fieldwork-based relationalities. Thus, sensory *a-where-ness* (Sand, Skovbjerg, and Tanggaard, 2022), practices of ethnographic “talking whilst

research space opened up (Eastmond, 2007; Miles and Crush, 1993; Sermijn, Devlieger and Loots, 2008), and to do so in ways that respected as much as possible participants’ boundaries and needs.

walking” (Anderson, 2004; see also Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), and other related emplaced and/or mobile actions and activities, all came to accompany, facilitate, enrich, and inform not only my understanding of participants’ layered and complex experiences of ‘queerness’, mobility, and ‘queerness’-in-mobility, but also participants’ experiences of such dimensions to begin with. Thriving as they were beyond a purely narrative dimension, I would perhaps not have had the chance to notice them, had I stuck to simpler, less mobile, albeit perhaps more orderly and systematic, interviewing techniques (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.).

1.3.3. Participant-Centered Methodologies

The last point apprehended above brings me to raise one final consideration concerning the methodologies employed throughout this research: i.e., the need to let the field be the main actor to dictate the methodology, rather than the methodology being what defines the configuration of the field (Amit, 2000; McGuigan, 1997 quoted in Pink, 2001). In the case of this work, I implemented this principle through the application of what can be termed ‘participant-centered’ methodological choices. Once the general methodological orientation of the project was established, a whole other set of smaller decisions had to be constantly made and negotiated through each and every single encounter between participants and me. The rationale behind this was primarily tied to the fact that I found myself working with such a diverse group of people, that each single case challenged me to partially rethink and adjust the methodological strategies that I had identified at the beginning as the most appropriate ones for the conduction of this work, in order to make sure that research could actually happen. This explains why, rather than adopting a uniform methodology valid for each and every participant, I eventually resorted to integrate disparate qualitative methods in my research interactions, which, in some cases, proved to be profoundly different from one another. For example, I attempted to use photo-elicitation techniques (Van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart, 2010; see also Fobear, 2016; Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021) with one participant, Shanto, who had immediately revealed to be passionate about cinematography and photography, and who seemed to be comfortable expressing his stories and feelings through images other than through words alone. Even though I eventually failed to do so, mainly, albeit not exclusively, for privacy-related concerns (see Chapter Four of this thesis, Section 4.3), this attempt nonetheless opened up unprecedented spaces for reflection and conversation: conversation indeed starting off from those same photos that ended up not being included in research, but ultimately evolving into passionate, cinephile discussions of movies and tv shows, as well as of Shanto’s own ideas for movie-scripts and other related artistic projects. In these conversational spaces, photographic and cinematic narratives – whether already existing out in the world, or only in Shanto’s mind – functioned as the material through and against which this participant’s own life took

shape and unfolded in front of me, and I thus had to find ways to account for them as such. With another participant, Sam, I solicited narratives mostly through free, non-recorded walking conversations (Anderson, 2004; Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), given the fact that he allowed me to enter decisive layers of his life-story only while engaging in long walks away from the center of his small town, towards the more isolated wooded areas surrounding it. Again, and as already discussed, with yet a few more participants, I attempted to activate sensory a-where-ness (Sand, Skovbjerg and Tanggaard, 2022) as the main tool to solicit narratives from them, as soon as I realized that they would consciously ask me to meet them in the same places, or to engage in the same kind of emplaced activities, over and over again, for reasons that turned out to be deeply connected to their migratory and personal journeys (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.)⁵⁸.

As this discussion clarified, it is thus not always easy to univocally identify a single methodological strand within which to locate this research. In a way, other than positioning it within the realm of the staunchly qualitative, the rest of the methodologies employed across it escape rigid classification. Starting from the fact that, to many more or less strict anthropologists, this would not even count as properly ethnographic work in the first place, this research oscillates between the realms of the multi-sited (Marcus, 1995), multi-sided (Burger et al., 2024), patchwork (Günel and Watanabe, 2023), and walking (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008) ethnography, with incursions from narrative research, oral history, critical mobility studies, and human geography. Additionally, the realms of queer theory and area studies inform the very backdrop of this work, and provide several sets of lenses that I sometimes adopted, and other times attempted to challenge. In other words, this research's methodology and theoretical frameworks, too, just like its ethnographic fields, ended up forming a messy patchwork of different pieces threaded together, sometimes looking nothing like each other, but somehow still making sense in the striding mess of shapes and colors that came out of their newfound togetherness. To put it in more academically-viable terms, this work ended up relying on what Swain and King (2022, pp. 6-7) define as a bottom-up, inductive, and flexible methodology, deeply qualitative and rooted in an ethnographic ethos and sensibility, but at the same time made to adapt to the material configuration

⁵⁸ In yet another case – a unicum in this research – I found myself dealing with an entirely different kind of narrative: not one born from the relationality between participant and researcher and residing primarily in orality, but, rather, a written one – and officially published by a renowned Italian publishing house, for that matter. I am talking about Saif Ur Rahman Raja's book *Hijra*, which – however limiting this system of categorization might be – represents the first ever memoir/auto-fiction book published in Italy and in the Italian language, explicitly dealing with the experiences of growing-up as a gay, Muslim, brown, Pakistani 'immigrant' in Italy, after having reached the country through family reunification as a pre-teen. Due to the entirely different nature of the material that I found myself dealing with in this case, I enacted a whole other series of methodological strategies to attempt and incorporate this work into research. More specifically, I interacted with the book both from a more strictly literary standpoint (i.e., by focusing on the themes, contents, style, and the kind of representational strategies employed in its pages), as well as from a more anthropological perspective (i.e., by keeping track of what happened to the book in terms of its promotion, reception, and diffusion once it entered into the world). Ultimately, I had to reluctantly opt not to include a thorough discussion of the book into the present thesis, mostly out of concerns for the thematic coherence and scope of the work. *Hijra*, too, however, nonetheless contributed to shape my perspective on the dynamics under scrutiny here.

of the multiple, scattered, and im/mobile fields across which research itself developed, as well as to participants' preferences, needs, and psychological wellbeing, whenever possible.

1.4. Conclusions: A Paradox of Im/mobility

When I first started approaching the topic of this research, I was stuck. In fact, I first started approaching the topic of this research *exactly because* I was stuck. Both mentally stuck (as in: unable to write up my M.A. thesis and get my degree), and physically stuck (as in: forced to stay home by pandemic-related national and international travel restrictions). They were both very privileged forms of stuckness, if one thinks about it, considering that I had both a Master's Degree and a home where I could remain stuck in, to begin with. And the irony of it all was that this exact immobility – my perception of which was being enhanced by its being in dire contrast with my otherwise high ease of movement – brought me to engage with people who are, by definition, both extremely mobile and immobile at the same time, albeit in structurally-different ways than me: i.e., those who, because of complex interplays of global power imbalances, rooted in imperialism, racism, classism, and related politics of visas and passports' strength, do not get the chance to move around the world as travelers, tourists, or expats, but rather get lumped together under the category of the 'migrant' (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2015, p. 84; Koutonin, 2015). A further paradoxical development within this already rather paradoxical scenario emerges when one considers how much things changed in terms of im/mobility from March 2021, when I first began to work on an earlier version of this project, until today. What started for me as an immobile research endeavor translated, instead, into the most mobile three years of my life so far, which I spent shifting from place after place after place – both across and beyond Italy – either to physically follow the people of this research and their narratives (Marcus, 1995), or to refine and improve my academic formation. Suffice it to think that this chapter alone has been written and repeatedly reworked on in cities as distant from one another as Delhi, Rome, and Geneva, in the many different libraries, bedrooms, cafés, and offices that I found myself traversing and occupying throughout the duration of my PhD⁵⁹. And yet, my own re-gained mobility always remained an extremely ambivalent one, in a constant, unresolvable tension both with its opposite, immobility, and with participants' own movements and moorings, as well as with the just-as-ambivalent figurations of what im/mobility meant to participants themselves – the latter, rarely coinciding with what im/mobility meant, instead, to me. When it came to my interlocutors, in fact, those same levels of mobility

⁵⁹ I completed this research under the purview of the PhD course in 'Civilizations of Asia and Africa', ISO Department, Sapienza University of Rome, thanks to the 3-year funding that it provided me with. Additionally, I conducted two research-adjacent trips in Delhi, India, in the months of January-February '24, and October-November of that same year. I was also granted additional funds by my institution to spend a three-month research period as a Junior Fellow affiliated to the Gender Center of the Geneva Graduate Institute, from April to June '25.

and immobility, that, for me, were inextricably linked, first and foremost, to the methodological imperative of ‘successful’ research conduction, would acquire meanings very much tied, instead, to the materiality of their own trajectories of sexual/queer migration (Carrillo, 2017; Mole, 2021): to the plans, hopes, dreams, delusions, sorrows, and disappointments, that participants’ figurations and experiences of life in (queer/sexual) migration rested upon, and further produced in turn. The following excerpt from my fieldwork diaries – one dating back to my first months of research, and, more specifically, to the first ever encounter with a participant that I travelled out of Rome for – will hopefully contribute to open up a first window into this double-edged dynamic.

Shanto is sitting on one of the sofas in the hostel hall in front of the reception counter. He is wearing earphones and he is charging his phone. When he sees me, he invites me to sit near him, and we start to chat. One of the first things that he asks me is how much it costed me to sleep in the hostel. I answer vaguely, saying something along the lines of: “Well I don’t know, plus the university is going to reimburse me”. He seems surprised, so I tell him that, if you think about it, I’m there for work, to take his interview, so it only makes sense [that my ‘employer’ will take care of the expenses]. He replies surprised and slightly amused, by saying something along these lines: “Oh so you’re here only for interviewing me! You could have told me! I thought you were here for pleasure!”. He says everything jokingly, but I’m feeling embarrassed and I get defensive: I had definitely told him about the interview before coming, hadn’t I? After this awkward first exchange, I try to get back on track by explaining to him that I’m happy to be out of Rome for a while, that somehow this is also a holiday for me, and that both [work and pleasure] coexist. He replies jokingly that next time *I’ll have to get the university to pay for him to come to Rome*, instead that for me to go to [name of his town] (fieldnotes, 06/2023).

There are many conclusions that could be drawn, starting off from this ethnographic vignette. They range from reflections on the difficulty to negotiate the boundaries between what counts as work/research and what as pleasure/fun from the point of view of both participants and researcher; to discussions of how a simple misunderstanding might risk altering a research relationality built with much time and effort; up until broader discussions of positionality, self-awareness, perception, and power relations in ethnographic research. However, I now want to focus on this episode’s potential to illuminate the already-mentioned ‘paradox of im/mobility’, which structured this research from its very beginning to the end. As the discussion carried out so far should have made clear by now, since the beginning of research conduction, I had established that the basic scheme that I would stick to for the realization of this project would be the following: I would travel to each participant’s place of residence; spend some time there in their company, collecting ‘data’ through informal conversations, participant-observation, and, whenever possible and/or necessary, interviews; and I would ideally repeat the same operation with each person multiple times over the course of research. The rationale behind this was two-fold: on the one hand, by doing so, I would get to carry the economic, but also, at times, the physical and emotional burden of mobility and travel. This seemed to me the least I could

do to ease people's participation in research, and to make the process less tedious and heavy on them as possible. On the other hand, by physically travelling to their places of residence, I would also get to experience the spatial and relational worlds where participants' daily lives unfolded, thus potentially adding layers of thickness to a fieldwork that, otherwise, struggled to develop in a more rigorously immersive anthropological fashion. As Shanto's words quite brilliantly illuminate, however, this mode of reasoning proved to be at least partially flawed. What he points out to, by means only of a quick and casual comment, is a rather poignant dilemma, structural to research practice itself. One that can be simplistically summarized as follows: why should the researcher be the one to have all the 'fun' and get the chance to travel and move around – and, besides, to do all that for free – and not the participant?⁶⁰ Why cannot the university pay for a participant to go and meet the researcher, rather than the other way around, in this way granting the participant himself the chance to explore a different city, meet new people, get time off work, and overall have a break from the often burdensome routine of life in migration? In the case of Shanto, for instance, a desire for further mobility, following the onset of migration and the success of his asylum application, constituted a constant presence in his self-narratives, a projected milestone that, once reached, could have helped prove the success of a path of mobility from Bangladesh to Italy, which he had already started to regret only a few months into his new life as a recognized SOGI refugee. Afterall, why can't a field that is developing across different sites – if not multi-sited in Marcus's (1995) original conception, at least surely covering multiple geographical locations – be so also for the 'researched', other than for the researcher alone? Wouldn't it be just as interesting in terms of fieldwork conduction to see what happens when such a differently-directed mobility is put into place, perhaps even officially so, through the deployment of institutional funds?

When properly contextualized in Shanto's biographical trajectory, these and other similar questions, which can be inferred from his small, yet incisive provocation, might turn out to be tied more to a certain age-, gender-, and class-specific eagerness to become a 'citizen of the world' (see, e.g., Baas, 2016; Collins, 2020; see also Chapter Four, Section 4.3.), rather than to a conscious will to move a revolutionary critique to the inner workings of the academy and the world-system at large. However, this does not mean that they do not hold, at the same time, the potential to yield much deeper reflections, both on the aforementioned paradox of im/immobility that this specific research

⁶⁰ A discussion on the inadequacy of PhD scholarships and fundings in post-2020 inflation-ridden Italy clearly lies beyond the scope of this work. Still, I want to acknowledge that the only thing that allowed me to move so much during these past years of research was my own class privilege and the related support that my family was able (and willing!) to provide me with. Had I not had the chance to steadily live at home all throughout the duration of my PhD – thus not having to pay for rent and food, among other things –, I would have never been able to attain the level of mobility that fueled this research in the first place. Here it is yet another layer of the im/mobility paradox that fueled this research from beginning to end.

is built on, as well as on the functioning of ethnography tout court. And indeed, Shanto's words crucially contributed to bring to my attention two truths of research, which might appear obvious to many, and yet remained initially opaque to me: first of all, and quite simply, that mobility and immobility mean different things to different people – or, even, to the same person in different contexts and/or moments of their life –, and that these different, ambivalent, at times even contrasting meanings and representations are, in and of themselves, worthy of analysis. In fact, they might even deserve to become the centerpiece of analysis itself⁶¹. And secondly, the fact that the frequent interplays of im/mobility, which, incidentally, structured this work from beginning to end, never happened in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, they developed across a research ground that, no matter how creative, co-constructed, and intimate could aspire to become with time, was nonetheless only allowed to exist along specific routes, directions, and orientations, which were determined, in turn, by uneven allocations of money, documents, and power (see Cresswell, 2010, p. 24). It was exactly from this differentiated access to movement and resources that stemmed Shanto's disappointment in learning that, no, the university could not reimburse his travel expenses to come and meet the person who would write about his life in a PhD thesis – a thesis to be later made public under the name of that same university which could not even contemplate his desire for mobility in the first place. In other words, that a research project on his sexual mobility did not envision nor fostered, for him, any actual possibility for further, potentially productive movement. Obviously, the university was but one of many other actors implicated in determining the differentiated accesses to mobility that lied behind every step of this project, and that, as a matter of fact, very much exceeded it. As already hinted at, my burgundy-colored Italian passport was the first and most influential tool of distinction between being able to access certain routes of movement over others, between being labeled a traveler, rather than a migrant⁶². This is not to say that participants were immobile while I got all the privilege to move – the picture is much more complex than that. In fact, many of my interlocutors shifted multiple locations both before and after reaching Italy, and along particularly drastic trajectories that I have never

⁶¹ I will come back to this point repeatedly throughout the rest of this thesis. In fact, in a way, the entirety of this thesis will constitute an attempt to critically engage with different representations of im/mobility along several scales ranging from the body to the globe (Cresswell, 2010), as well as with the different meanings attached to it either by the people partaking in them, or by broader discourses on migration and migration management.

⁶² Even though I am adamant in understanding different typologies of mobilities as products of (often violent) politics of migration management, rather than as innocent descriptors of simply-existing experiences of movement, throughout this work I nonetheless do not give up on differentiating between substantially-distant routes of 'migration' and 'travel'. I choose to do so because this distinction, though 'fictive' (as in: not rooted in ontological conditions, but rather produced by policy- and politics-led rationales), is a deeply performative one, and, as such, it produces pervasive, material consequences on people's lives. I am honestly skeptic of practices of solidarity that group different people-in-mobility (no matter if 'migrants' or 'expats') under the banner of a shared migrant-ness, as I fear that they may contribute more to obscure the materiality of the global injustices implied in, and perpetrated by, contemporary regimes of migration management, rather than offering strategies to fight them. Even more crucially so, here it will be participants' understandings of these different labels and regimes of im/mobility – of who is a migrant, and who is a refugee; of what being labelled as one rather than the other implies, etc., – to be privileged by this work.

experienced in my life, and most likely never will. From this optic, then, it was the ‘extreme’ forms of mobility that they engaged in⁶³ – rather than stuckness, but at same time also implying stuckness as their precondition – to mark the space of their ‘otherness’, within a global map of differently accessed routes of movement and mooring. Participants also often consciously employed their mobility to elude me, either by moving away from my attempts to meet, or by not sharing their movements or plans of movements when we should have met. In fact, in many cases, I was the one stuck in place, unable to move because of academic commitments, personal obligations, or, quite simply, because of the burn out that comes with being too much on the move for too much time. In light of this complexity, and consequently to the multiple valences that moving and not moving acquired for each person involved in this research – myself included – in each stage of their/our lives, I strongly object the simplistic association between mobility and freedom (positive), on the one hand, and immobility and passivity (negative), on the other, as well as a reading of mobility as transgressive and pathological (negative) vs. immobility as normative and acceptable (positive) (see Creswell, 2006, pp. 25-56). As the ensuing sections of the work will show, participants’ narratives repeatedly contributed to turn around and complexify these fictive, although pervasive, associations. Instead, my aim here is to begin reflecting on how research itself can play into already-existing structural and globalized imbalances in access to modalities and directions of im/mobility – involuntarily albeit systematically ending up reinforcing them, even if only through the simple act of providing the researcher with money to book a hostel to go meet with a participant, who, on the contrary, has to stay still waiting for her to arrive. If, as geographer Tim Creswell (2010, p. 21) puts it, “[m]obility is a resource that is differently accessed”, then, who gets to move, where, how, how fast, along what routes, and why (pp. 22-26) are all elements that such an im/mobile research project has to constantly keep under scrutiny, both in terms of researcher and participants’ field-construction and field-elusion, as well as through an attempt to place them within broader considerations on the effects provoked on them by contemporary policies of migration management. Looked at from this new perspective, Shanto’s provocative comment thus proves to hold, within itself, the potential to point and open up to what Creswell defines as the “politics of mobility” (2010, p. 21, emphasis added)⁶⁴:

⁶³ By that, I mean ‘illegal’ migratory routes from South Asia to Italy, which pass through many other intermediate destinations (Gulf countries, Libya, Eastern Europe, and more).

⁶⁴ According to Creswell (2010, pp. 22-26), there are six elements that make up the texture of mobility, and that thus need to be addressed when a politics of mobility is being developed, each one of them associated to a simple yet evocative questions: 1) Motive force: why does a person or a thing move? 2) Velocity: how fast does a person or a thing move? 3) Rhythm: in what rhythm does a person or thing move? 4) Route: what route does it take? 5) Experience: how does it feel? 6) Friction: when and how does it stop? Or, what kind of friction does the mobility experience? By taking up this set of elements and related questions as a starting point to foray into participants’ sexually and/or gender defiant im/mobilities from South Asia to Italy, it is exactly to such a politically-charged apprehension of mobility that the rest of the thesis will attempt to attend.

By politics I mean social relation that involve the production and distribution of power. By a politics of mobility I mean the ways in which mobilities are both *productive* of such social relations and *produced* by them. Social relations are of course complicated and diverse. They include relations between classes, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and religious groups as well as a host of other forms of group identity. Mobility, as with other geographical phenomena, lies at the heart of all of these. [...] My point [...] is the development of a geographical understanding of mobility that can in turn inform theorizations of gender, ethnicity, or any other form of social relation.

When approaching mobility from this perspective – and all the while tending to ‘queerly’-inflected forms of movement and mooring –, it becomes imperative not to ignore the multiple (political) implications of im/mobility that traverse this research, in both their individual/subjective, and collective/global dimensions. Even more so, it becomes almost inevitable to make research itself pivot around these same implications, by critically engaging with them through, and beyond, the dimension of methodology itself. And indeed, reflecting on im/mobilities concomitantly in terms of structural and globalized imbalances of power, as well as of research ethics, methodology, and content – rather than only as an unpleasant nuisance that had to somehow be resolved, if proper immersion in the field were to be gained – proved to be an operation not only crucial to conceptualize my positionality as researcher and my research practice; but one that also came to guide, shape, and make sense of the ‘data’ and ‘findings’ emerging from this research. Better yet, one that rose up to the status of research findings ‘proper’ – and extremely significant ones, for that matter. This implied, in turn, two additional things. First, on a more strictly methodological terrain, that the long stretches of time during which I struggled to access the fields because of schedules’ incompatibilities, as well as of participants’ and/or my own im/mobility; the unpredictable disruptions that in some cases came to halt what I thought to be strongly established practices of research; the alternatively immobile and hyper-mobile pace of life in queer migration, that escaped my capability as researcher to keep up with it and account for it – especially in its initial stages, which can, nonetheless, last for years: all of these apparently ‘non-moments’ of research were to be apprehended as nothing less than proper research ‘data’ per se, as anticipated above. In other words, as anthropologist Virginia Caputo (2000, p. 26) writes, I also had to come “to the understanding that in fact, the difficulties were an important part of the process of research itself. Indeed, the interruptions experienced in practice became part of the resulting ethnography”. And secondly, and very much consequently, that participants’ movements and moorings – not to be understood as the opposite poles of a dichotomy, but rather as two, at times overlapping, points of a messier continuum – as well as the meanings attributed to them by participants themselves, deserved to become the core of this whole research: the critical juncture that this research would attempt to reflect on and thematize, also by taking up the additional task of concomitantly considering

the workings that non-normative genders and sexualities play within such entangled webs of movement and mooring, mobility and immobility, wandering and stuckness.

To summarize these last few points, and to conclude by coming back where this whole discussion started, it has by now become clear that this entire research setup could and should be aptly described as a constantly-under-construction network of entangled im/mobilities: both participants' and my own; both personal and research-driven, as well as structural and globally-instituted. Ultimately, it is (also) this complex and layered framework that the present thesis will attempt to thematize. First of all because, as stated above, im/mobility – diverse approaches to, and conceptions of, im/mobility, developing across very different scales, ranging from the micro-level of the individual body to the macro-dimension of the globe (Creswell 2006; 2010) – was the core around which participants' lives invariably revolved, in one way or another. Secondly, because it was exactly the struggle to move, together with the opposite struggle of being too-much on the move, that have most profoundly shaped this project on 'queer' transnational movements: its premises, its developments, its findings, its scope, and, even more so, its limitations. And finally, because it simply would be not fair nor ethical to carry out research on 'queer' transnational migrations without interrogating how global inequalities, politics of migration management, and differentiated accesses to paths of mobility play out, both within and beyond the researcher-participant relationality that a project such as this is so heavily reliant on.

CHAPTER TWO: GESTURING

2.1. Introduction: Bodily Movements as the *Trans-Loci* of ‘Queerness’

In his influential account of what he terms “politics of mobility”, geographer Tim Cresswell provides a definition of mobility itself as “the entanglement of movement, representation, and practice” (2010, p. 19)⁶⁵. That is, he conceives of mobility as a composite concept which encompasses the very concrete fact of movement (be it of objects, ideas, people, parts of the body...), but which also exceeds it at the same time: the meanings that get ascribed to any given movement through its multiple representations, as well as the fact of movement as experienced and felt through the human body, constitute, in fact, the two other essential facets of mobility, inseparable from physical movement in and of itself, as well as from its alleged opposite, immobility (see also Salazar, 2019). Indeed, he argues, “[m]ovement is rarely just movement” (2006, p. 6); it is rather made into living matter – and, crucially, living matter of inherently political nature – by the meanings that both attach to it, and discursively produce it at the same time. According to Cresswell’s viewpoint, all three components of mobility (i.e., movement, representation, and practice), as well as each one of mobility’s possible manifestations are inherently political: that is, they are “implicated in the production of power and relations of domination” (p. 20). Understood through this framework, mobility stops referring exclusively to more ‘standard’ instances of movement (e.g., travel, transport, migration), and rather begins to encompass a much vaster range of im/mobile manifestations, extending in scale from the smallest, apparently most inconsequential bodily gesture, to the riskiest attempt at crossing nation-state borders (Cresswell, 2006). The smallest and the widest among such scales are not, however, to be understood as isolated, opposite ends of a linear spectrum, but rather as dimensions that coexist in spatial and temporal proximity, and that inform each other all the time. This aspiration to look at mobilities and immobilities – henceforth: im/mobilities (see degli Uberti 2019; 2021; Della Puppa and Sanò, 2020; 2021; Nimführ and Sesay 2019; Salazar, 2019; Schapendonk and Steel 2014)⁶⁶ – as unfolding, interconnectedly, across such a prismatic diversity of shapes and scales (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021, p. 512) constitutes one of the few genuinely novel aspects that Cresswell (2010) identifies in what, from

⁶⁵ As Noel B. Salazar (2019) highlights, albeit intersecting, mobility and migration are not simply synonyms. Even if migration has to necessarily entail some form of mobility, the latter should be rather understood as “movement infused with both self-ascribed and attributed meanings” (p. 14). Throughout this thesis, I will differently employ migration, mobility, and even more so, im/mobility, to describe the different, often communicating, scales of movement and non-movement that my interlocutors engage and are engaged in throughout their life-stories across South Asia and Italy.

⁶⁶ As cogently argued by Francesco Della Puppa and Giuliana Sanò (2021, p. 512), the combined formula im/mobility “also aims to deconstruct the hegemonic character of a narrative that claims to represent the mobility of ‘others’ only from the point of view of the subject who observes and not of those who move, generating the belief that being spatially immobile is equivalent to being so from a personal and existential point of view. Rather, mobility and immobility should be observed in the light of ethnographic accounts and findings [...]. In doing so, both will appear as the result of a combination that creates a prism, which in turn is composed of other combinations and multiple faces”.

the early 2000s onwards, begins to be theorized as ‘the *new* mobilities paradigm’: a transdisciplinary shift within social sciences, focused on the dynamics at play in shaping a world perceived to be more on the move than ever before (see Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006)⁶⁷. Additionally, while up until that point most studies of mobilities, upon closer analysis, would reveal themselves to be more about places than about movement in and of itself⁶⁸, the new mobilities paradigm is one throughout which mobility studies finally begin “to take the actual fact of movement seriously” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 18; see also Salazar, 2019). An actual fact that, if one follows the overall rationale of this ‘new’ theoretical orientation, should be deemed to encompass movements *of* the and *in* the body, too – i.e., the gestures that the present chapter is titled after.

Starting off from this analytical background, here in this chapter I want to direct the broader discussion of ambivalent im/mobilities between South Asia and Italy lying at the heart of this research, to the apprehension of one specific scale among the several others across which such im/mobile trajectories unfold. More specifically, to the smallest scale of all: that is to say, the one comprised of, and happening within, the singularity of the human body. In other words, I hereby want to turn to participants’ im/mobilities understood as happening *in* and *through* their bodily movements and gestures, no matter how small and inconsequential those might appear to be. Even though the different scales that im/mobility develops across are never really independent from one another – suffice it to think that human movement in space (e.g., migration) is always already embodied, and thus always necessarily movement *of the body* in space –, by virtually isolating the smallest one of them, here I want to highlight the body, with its movements and non-movements, as a dense site for the unravelling, inscribing, production, and reproduction of power throughout transnational sexual/queer migrations. That is, I want to bring into conversation two different sets of mobilities, which happen coterminously and shape each other in profound ways: the movement *of* ‘queer’ (as in: sexually/gender defiant) bodies across national borders and through different regimes of transnational migration; and the movements and gestures happening *within* the confines of those same ‘queer’ bodies involved in

⁶⁷ A comprehensive critical background of the most salient characteristics of the ‘new’ mobilities paradigm, as well as of the revised conceptions of mobility and im/mobility it rests upon, is provided by Stefano degli Uberti (2021, p. 530), who articulates it in the following terms: “The mobilities approach urges to conceptualize ‘being mobile’ as a ‘way of life’ rather than an exception (De Bruijn, Van Dijk and Foeken 2001) along with an invitation to enlarge the scholarly attention on mobility, from a predominant migrants-centred focus to wide circulation of subjects – tourists, pilgrims, expatriates, drivers, and artists, the complementary role of those who experience mobility indirectly (non-migrants). Pointing out to the importance of addressing how differentially it takes place in distinct times, contexts and scales (Heil et al. 2017), the concept of mobility is not framed as limited to physical movement but as encompassing other forms of mobility: goods, information, ideas, values, etc. The growing awareness of the power dynamics embedded in mobility (Glick-Schiller and Salazar, 2013) and the risk to overlook its unequal distribution among individuals (Bauman, 1998), establishing a straightforward bond between freedom and mobility dynamics, have nonetheless led to recognize how the study of mobility likewise involves immobilities, raising attention to the constraints, regulations and limits placed on migration”.

⁶⁸ A striking example provided by Cresswell (2010) is represented by studies of migration that develop as analyses of migrants’ points of departure and arrival, rather than of the act of migration itself.

migration. I do so, in a move to apprehend migrant ‘queer’ bodies – not only moving bodies in space, but also movements *in* and *of* the body – as meaning-dense, inherently political assemblages, in the sense of the term evoked in Cresswell’s (2010) formulation of his politics of mobility, but also accorded to it by epistemologies of queer theory itself.

Surely enough, the analytical approach that I have just delineated will not come across as particularly new or innovative to those working with, or in proximity of, queer and sexuality studies. The denaturalization of the body and the consequent uncovering of its inherently political and discursively-produced quality have been central to queer theory since its earliest interventions (although not always in the most explicit of terms, especially at the beginning; see Butler, 1993a; 1999, pp. vii-xxvi, for a theoretical reevaluation of some of the philosopher’s initial positions, including their oversight of the materiality of the body). As famously argued by Judith Butler (1999), neither gender nor – crucially – sex can be considered naturally-given, uncontested and uncontestable expressions of the laws of biology, to which cultural codes simply attach themselves only at a later stage. Rather, gender is constituted performatively: that is, by way of the collective and compulsory repetition of highly-regulated acts (how we talk, how we walk, how we move, and how we dress, among other things; but also, who we desire, and who we have and not have sex with), which, rather than comprising the expression of individual performances of the self, are what create individuals as intelligible selves (i.e., as subjects) in the first place (ibid.). In Butler’s words (1999, pp. 43-44), “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”. Within this framework, sex gets understood as nothing other than the effect of gender (i.e., of its performativity); identity as always already gender identity, and “for the simple reason that “persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (p. 22); and bodies as having no prior meaning before being marked, again, by and through gender. More specifically, the body becomes both the recipient and producer site for the inscription of norms; the location where norms act and get acted, often violently, via language, institutions, and practices. The same process which, in a perpetual cycle with no discernible beginning nor end, discursively produces bodies and their apparent ‘biological’ naturalness to begin with. All throughout the stream of thought and theory that from Butler inaugurates, the body thus gets reconceptualized as both product and re/producer of those power dynamics that, together, comprise the processes of subjectivation. That is to say, that allow for subject positions to come into being as such in the first place, and that establish which ones among them count as intelligible, acceptable, as ‘real’, even (i.e., those that substantiate and naturalize the coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire, within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality), and which ones become, instead, aberrations, infringements of what

comprise the realms of both the ‘norm’ and the ‘normal’, and thus get relegated to a sphere of outright non-subjectness (i.e., those that interrupt the ‘coherence’ of the heterosexual matrix) (Butler, 1999).

The workings of these dynamics become even more evident – while also being further complexified, if not, at times, outright refuted (see e.g., Ahmad, 2009; khanna, 2016) – when viewed through explicitly transnational lenses and area-sensitive sensibilities, such as those required to analyze the movements of ‘migrant’ ‘queer’ bodies across nation-state borders. Queer migration scholarship has thoroughly demonstrated that the relationship between migration and queerness is rarely a straightforward one – that is, one in which queerness solely works as the push factor driving lgbt+ individuals away from their countries of origin and towards a more ‘liberated’ life elsewhere. Rather, queer migration is to be more widely understood “as a [...] dynamic, two-way process, whereby the experience of migration can also influence sexuality – the way it is understood, performed and experienced – even if the stated motivation is not sexuality-related” (Mole, 2021, p. 3). This implies that strategies of embodiment, modalities of identification, and vocabularies of sexual/gender defiance, as well as the meanings that get attributed to such embodied and discursive realms from the outside, can, and often do, transform across trajectories of transnational mobility and regimes of migration management, as also do their performative powers and effects. In more concrete terms, this implies, for instance, that identifying as a bisexual man in Dhaka might not be the same thing as getting legally recognized as a ‘gay refugee’ in a small provincial town in Italy; or, that having sex with other men in Pakistan might not automatically entail an adherence to the letter ‘g’ of the ever-expanding lgbtiaq+ acronym, but that it might begin to do so once one applies for asylum on SOGI grounds in Italy; or again, that identifying contextually as transgender (woman) and gay (man) might not necessarily come across as incongruous among khwaja sara and murat groups in Pakistan, and yet, will most likely be read as such inside the locales of an lgbt+ association in Rome. As the following chapter(s) will further explore, all across these and other transnationally-unfolding locations, interactions, and frictions, it is the body itself – its movements and non-movements all the more so – one of the first and most prominent sites where complex negotiations of both queerness and normativity have to pivot, often on a daily basis.

Hence, as this introduction started to clarify, the first, small scale of im/mobility that this thesis will take into account is one only apparently limited in scope. At first glance, it might indeed seem paradoxical to commence a work on transnational migrations – on mobilities that span across locations as far from each other on the map as Pakistan and Italy, or Bangladesh and Italy – by examining a set of tiny and ostensibly inconsequential bodily movements, like the involuntary raising of a participant’s pinky finger, or the half-enacted dancing moves of another. Even though small and fleeting when compared to the overarching sets of mobilities that lie behind the broader scope of this research,

I however want to argue that it is exactly the sometimes involuntary, other times carefully pondered, movements and non-movements of participants' bodies to constitute the sites where 'queerness' gets most meaningfully deployed and negotiated, reclaimed and recognized, contested and disavowed, transnationally. It is thus in this sense that bodies become what I define 'trans-*loci*' of queerness: meaning-dense, often-contested sites where queerness (and sexuality, as well as the realm of the sexual more broadly; see khanna, 2016) most emphatically pivots on, all throughout dynamics of transnational migration – an assemblage, this latter one, which in turn ranges in scale from the workings of the Italian system of migration management in its entirety, to people's mundane experiences of quotidian movement in and around the cities where they end up living (see further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.3.). And indeed, as it will become clearer with the unfolding of the following chapter, although starting off from extremely small gestures located in, and enacted by, individual participants, the discussion will not remain confined to those bodily movements alone. Rather, it will take them up as the cue to enter much broader considerations, not only of the overarching scale of transnational migration, but also – and crucially so – of the multiple trajectories tying together transnational migration and 'queerness', on both embodied and discursive levels. Conversely, the subsequent chapters of this work that will start off as explicit examinations of increasingly vaster scales of mobility (i.e., Chapter Three: Walking; Chapter Four: Migrating) will, in turn, constantly circle back to, and get entangled with, discussions of small interactions, bodily and ideological movements, developing across much more reduced scales than the ones entailed by their primary object of focus. There will be, in other words, a pattern in the thematical organization of the present work, which will contribute, in and of itself, to show the fundamental interconnectedness of extremely different scales of im/mobility. While being as distant in their extent as, for instance, the involuntary movement of a pinky finger and the dangerous crossing of multiple land and sea borders, these movements and non-movements will also prove to be in incredibly close relation to each other. The division between regimes of im/mobility that I make all throughout this thesis – between gesturing (Chapter Two), walking (Chapter Three), and migrating (Chapter Four) – is thus a fundamentally artificial one: surely instrumental for the organization of the present work, but also one which the contents of this thesis will themselves contribute to expose, complicate, and eventually disrupt.

2.2. Sam. A Pinky Finger Gave You Away? Re-Constituting Discourses of Maleness and Gayness Across South Asia and Italy

The discussion that will occupy the following section of the thesis takes its cue from a miniscule, generally negligible, and indeed often neglected, part of the human body: the hand's little finger. When I opened up this chapter by stating that it would be devoted to the smallest among the scales

across which im/mobility developed and acquired meaning(s) throughout this research (see Cresswell, 2010), I really meant *the smallest*. Size shall not matter, after all. And indeed, in spite of its modest dimension and generally minor role on the whole of the economy of human physiology, the pinky finger – with its movements and non-movements, and its decorative embellishments – has been invested of a surprisingly rich array of meanings, at least across the assemblage that comes together under the banner of ‘Western culture’ (see e.g., Gere, 2001, p. 370; Medhurst, 2023, p. 9; Oestreich, 2016, p. 8). Among the most distinctive and pervasive ones – for sure the most relevant for the purposes of this discussion – is that as “distinguishing icon of effeminacy” (Gere, 2001, p. 370), which the pinky acquires when it gets more or less involuntarily raised by a Man (capital M) during the course of what can be the most mundane and varied sets of activities. It is enough for the pinky to go up when it is not supposed to – when holding a cup, for example – for its invariably male owner to risk being transported into a realm of reduced masculinity, if not of homosexuality tout court (ibid.). It clearly does not take much to fail at doing gender right (Butler, 1988) – a micro-movement of the smallest of our fingers will do – and it is, indeed, in the ease with which these gender-slippages happen that lies the potential of such an otherwise inconsequential part of the human body to unsettle calcified expectations of normative, strictly heterosexual, manhood. It is exactly such a disjuncture between the pinky’s apparent insignificance and concomitant powers as normality-disruptor, that David Gere (2001, p. 370) convincingly pins down within his broader discussion of effeminacy through the analysis of choreographer Joe Goode’s performance *29 Effeminate Gestures*:

So what is it about the decorative pinkie that inspires such a frenzy of societal fascination and discomfort? It is nothing but a digit, one in ten, curling back when its assistance in grasping an object is not strictly necessary. Why shouldn’t the owner of that finger take the opportunity to supersede function with style? That little pinkie doesn’t hurt anyone, now does it? And yet its curve is taken by many as a calamitous affront, as a sign for the degradation of culture, for the downfall of the Western world. It is almost as if the little pinkie were a Stealth weapon, a diminutive cultural question mark capable of unsettling the established order. Think of it: how is it that three inches of bone and flesh are capable of such dramatic commentary? Perhaps the effeminate man with his arsenal of mere gestures is a more powerful actor than one would think.

Starting off from the acknowledgment of the paradox of the pinky’s apparent inconsequentiality and coterminous effective power to encapsulate “the degradation of culture”, as well as the “downfall of the Western world as we know it” (ibid.), here, I want to open up the discussion to a broader, transnational horizon of embodiment and meaning-making: a horizon that begins as pivoting around the figure of the powerfully disruptive effeminate man and his raised pinky, but that eventually ends up moving well beyond the both of them. More specifically, I aim to employ the bodily gesture of in/voluntarily raising the hand’s little finger as the key to sneak into the following two-fold discussion: on

the one hand, of the effeminate body and its gestures as transnationally ambivalent, yet productive, sites for both (longed-for) recognition and (unwanted, avoided) exposure; on the other, of the broader mechanisms and dynamics of meaning-making that, hidden behind apparently simple and unambiguous gestures, come to inform the re/constitution of discourses of gayness and maleness within a context of transnational migration – specifically, within the context of SOGI asylum migration from Pakistan to Italy, that the following section will turn to. I will begin to do so by first looking at how these dynamics unfold throughout the life trajectory and the bodily movements of one primary participant in this research, the owner himself of the pinky in question: Sam, a thirty-plus Pakistani man who manages to obtain refugee status in Italy on grounds of his sexual orientation, but whose modalities of dis/identifying (see Muñoz, 1999) with ‘queerness’ and with discourses of gender and sexuality more broadly change with time and in space, eluding most attempts at neat, definitive classification. I will then proceed to further complicate the discussion by interlocking it with the experiences of another participant and her own approaches to discourses on, and embodiments of, ‘queerness’ in migration: Atif, also a Pakistani SOGI refugee in Italy, whose life trajectory and strategies of defiant dis/identification and embodiment are, however, profoundly different from, if not at times entirely opposite to, Sam’s. The broader purpose of this section – which has to be understood as actively in conversation with the section that will follow right after – will ultimately be to account for some of the possible discursive and material implications of transnational migration from South Asia to Italy on embodiments and epistemologies of sexual/gender defiance, as carried out by subjects who are not necessarily comfortable with, fluent in, or imbued in, the same exact languages of *lgbt-ness*⁶⁹ that are almost invariably expected of them by both Italian mainstream *lgbt+* activism and structures of migration management alike. In doing so, I will recognize the body – its movements and non-movements, its sometimes miniscule yet meaningful gestures – as the preferred site where complex, at times contrasting, dynamics of sexual and/or gender defiance get contested, negotiated, and reconstituted, over both time and space.

Ethnographic Meta-Vignette #1

To set the record straight before I properly get to the heart of the matter, Sam’s pinky finger entered the ethnographic field of this research only indirectly. That is, it was a ‘character’ in an anecdote that

⁶⁹ With the formula ‘*lgbt-ness*’ I refer to the subjectivity-based model of sexual orientation and gender identity that the acronym is most frequently associated with. By extension, I also refer to it as implying an understanding of sexuality as rooted in ontology, subjecthood, and subject-formation, as well as in gender and sexuality as two firmly distinct realms of existence. This was, in fact, the approach that I could notice circulating the most in the locales of associationism and *lgbt+/queer* migrants’ support that I had the chance to interact with throughout research conduction. Mine always remained, however, a rather limited engagement. The deployment here described has thus no aspiration to representativity beyond the confines of the present research.

Sam shared with me during one of our meetings, rather than the pivot itself of one of those meetings. The episode that I am about to report below thus partially constitutes the account of an account: an ethnographic meta-vignette, where the performative potential inherent in the little finger's movement, however, still manages to yield effects that ripple well beyond the circumscribed space of both the following narrative and meta-narrative themselves. Always keeping the several levels of mediation that went into the making of these episodes in mind, it is to a brief description of them that I now turn.

It's a cold November day when I go visit Sam in what is, at the time, his hometown: a small and rather anonymous provincial urban center in Northern Italy, where his newly-acquired refugee status has granted him access to the accommodation and services provided by a local SAI project⁷⁰. Since it is fairly early in the morning, we decide to go sit in one the few cafés in town to have breakfast together. We have been chatting informally for quite some time when he begins to tell me a story, an apparently trivial episode of everyday life in migration. It hasn't been long since Sam's arrival in Italy, when, one day, the head social worker of the local lgbt+ association, who had been following his case since the very beginning, invites him out for a friendly outing and offers him something to drink. When the time comes for Sam to take up the glass and bring it to his lips, he makes the apparently insignificant gesture of automatically raising his pinky finger. It is something that he has always done, he explains to me, something that he does even nowadays. While describing the anecdote, he reenacts the scene, and repeats the exact same bodily movement using the cappuccino cup in front of him. As soon as the social worker notices that specific hand movement – Sam continues – he amicably begins to tease Sam by telling him something along the lines of: “Look at you! Of course you must be gay!”⁷¹, hinting at the fact that he could tell just by looking at Sam's finger-raising gesture. The man then proceeds to quote a scene from a movie that Sam had not seen, but that, thanks to the

⁷⁰ The acronym SAI (*Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione*: Reception and Integration System) stands to indicate the network of local bodies in charge of realizing and coordinating projects for the reception and ‘integration’ of refugees in the Italian territory. The network represents the second level of Italy's migrant reception system, i.e., the one responsible for the accommodation of individuals who have already received international protection, as well as of those among asylum claimants who are affected by specific conditions of vulnerability. The first level of *accoglienza* (reception) takes place in CAS (*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*: Centers for Extraordinary Reception) – what migrants commonly refer to as ‘camps’. For further information on the specificities of Italy's system for the reception of asylum claimants and refugees, as well as to access updated data on this same regard, AIDA, 2023; 2024; 2025. For a more critical discussion of the workings of Italy's reception system, and with specific reference to the life-stories of the participants in this research, see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

⁷¹ The words ‘quoted’ here are the product of my reconstruction of Sam's reconstruction of the episode, and, as such, are not to be taken verbatim. I nonetheless did my best to convey the meaning of the episode by adhering as much as possible to the way in which Sam recounted it to me, in turn.

description provided by Sam during our conversation, I come to recognize as either French-Italian movie *La Cage aux Folles* (dir. Édouard Molinaro, 1978), or, more likely, its U.S. remake *The Birdcage* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1996). The somewhat iconic scene – incidentally, the same one David Gere brings up (2001, pp. 370-372) in his discussion of the pinky’s disruptive powers that I opened this section with – depicts an ironic, campy moment of normative-gender ‘training’: in what Gere (2001, p. 370) defines as “arguably the most hilarious scene in the entire film”, the character played by Robin Williams – coded on screen to be the more masculine one in the couple – is attempting to teach his more effeminate partner how to ‘act straight’, in anticipation to the visit they will soon receive from the extremely conservative family of their son’s bride-to-be. Notwithstanding all of Williams’ character’s attempts at training his partner’s body otherwise, the pinky of the man keeps on going up whenever it gets the chance to, and as effeminately and as awkwardly as possible, showing an obstinate resistance to the efficacy of any of the straightening devices being employed against it – and coterminously fueling, in this way, the comical charge of the scene (see Gere, 2001).

During the brief exchange described above – which Sam brings up, unprompted, at a later moment in time than when it actually happened, and which he partially reenacts in front of me inside that café –, the spontaneous, involuntary movement upwards of his pinky while raising a glass to drink functions as the bodily signal that, given the circumstances, not so much gives out, as rather *confirms* Sam’s ‘gayness’ to the social worker-turned-friend in front of him⁷². The body – in this case, a hand gesture that the Italian volunteer automatically associates with effeminacy and, almost consequentially, with a specific script of gay identity rooted in a long, well-recognizable tradition of culturally intelligible representations (e.g., the iconic scene from the two movies) – becomes the cue to Sam’s ‘queerness’ and, as such, the door towards a positive, rather hilarious moment of recognition of Sam’s gay subjectivity by another peer.

Having drawn this ethnographic meta-vignette, I am fully aware of how small and mediated of a narrative it provides, and hence of how inconsequential it might be regarded in the grand(er) scheme of this research. And yet, notwithstanding its objective limitedness and limitations, I believe that this anecdote provides an illuminating entry point into both the complexity of Sam’s journey – far greater than what this anecdote itself is able to hint at –, as well as the overarching argument that this thesis section purports to explore. Indeed, I argue, this micro-episode’s most productive potential lies

⁷² Given that Sam and the social worker already knew each other back then, and Sam was already very much in the process of claiming asylum on grounds of his sexual orientation, the interaction was not so much about ‘discovering’ Sam’s ‘queerness’ – it had already been established –, as about recognizing it and expressing its confirmation out loud.

exactly in its ability to go beyond its limited contingency, to uncover, instead, the multitude of layers that come together to give shape to the peripatetic, if not outright circular, bodily and discursive resignifications of ‘queerness’⁷³, that Sam’s project of im/mobility to Italy both informs and is accompanied by. In the discussion that follows, it will be exactly some of these layers that I will attempt to unpack.

For one thing, when thinking through this fieldwork episode in hindsight, I repeatedly found myself wondering whether it might have actually revolved around a possible misrecognition on the part of the social worker: was Sam’s finger movement really giving away something ‘queer’ from the point of view of Sam himself? In other words, was Sam aware of the pinky’s role as an effeminate gesture, or had he ever been made aware of it by someone else before that moment? After all – and I say this even at the risk of reiterating a self-evident argument, which might be extended to many other contexts as well – the hand and bodily gestures of a Pakistani man can be significantly different from those typically enacted in Italy, as can be, consequently, also the meanings that get attached to them (see, e.g., Kiaer and Kim, 2024 on Asian gestures through films; see also Lempert, 2019, on an anthropology of gesture). At the same time, however, here I want to advance a fundamentally different hypothesis, and suggest that the significance of this scenario lies not in the ‘original’ meaning of Sam’s gesture – if there even was one to begin with –, but somewhere else. Namely, in the peculiar meanings and culturally-specific, although potentially misplaced, representations that the gesture gets invested with from the outside; in the effects produced by this external attachment of meaning; and, finally, in the fact that such an external attachment of meaning manages to occur in the first place. Dance scholar Helen Thomas (1995, quoted in Cresswell, 2006, p. 128), in her discussion of dance as a form of cultural knowledge, argues that on top of being able to read through dance codes in and of themselves – i.e., to understand *what* the dance codes mean – what is also crucial is “to understand the context in order to be able to ask *how* does the movement mean?”. It is to an analogous interrogation of the *how* of the meaning of movement – translated here from dance to bodily gestures more broadly – that I hereby want to tend to. Meaning, after all, does not simply originate in a vacuum, but is rather co-constructed in context and relationality, and in context and relationality it performatively acts.

Inside the contained and contextual space of the interaction between the social worker and Sam – occurring in an otherwise unspecified recent past ‘somewhere in Northern Italy’ –, the simple, involuntary movement of a finger gets automatically positioned within a culturally-sanctioned genealogy of effeminate gayness. It is exactly through this positioning, then, that the bodily movement actively

⁷³ As the advancement of the discussion will clarify, it would be more apt to speak of a framework of gender/sexuality as a continuum, rather than of gender and sexuality as two separate, albeit communicating, realms.

gives rise to a positive moment of recognition: one that develops through the deployment of the ironic-to-the-point-of-camp subtext of a movie scene, depicting an episode of normative gender self-policing, an act of programmatic on-screen de-effeminization. Crucially, it is a moment of external recognition that Sam does not reject nor questions, in this way implicitly embracing the implications of his raised pinky, as they get thematized by his interlocutor: i.e., through a script of (campy, mocked) effeminate gay identity. Indeed, in recounting the episode to me, Sam does not hint at any particular signs of reluctance or refusal on his part towards his friend's interpretation, but rather keeps on laughing back at himself, gradually disclosing a proneness for self-irony that had not been so evident to me before that moment, but that I soon learn to recognize as a subtle peculiarity of his character. It is in this sense, then, that the meaning over-inscribed on the pinky comes to supersede both the physicality of the gesture itself, as well as any other connotation or non-connotation that might have been originally attached to it by Sam. At the same time, however, this superimposition of meaning both hides behind itself, and is made possible by, a set of complex discursive and material reworkings of the realms of sexual/gender defiance, which have gradually taken shape through Sam's trajectory of migration from Pakistan to Italy. These reworkings are what interest me the most here, and it is exactly through their hidden yet persistent presence, I argue, that this otherwise rather inconsequential episode acquires value.

Predictably enough, this that I have retraced above constitutes but one of many other instances in which the body, with its more or less voluntary movements, functioned for Sam as a repository and a display for his 'queerness': as the juncture where a distancing from the expectations of stable, normative manhood took up a material and visible form. The becoming visible and being seen of such 'queerly'-inflected embodiments, however, is a fact that does not necessarily and automatically have to result in a positive outcome of mutual recognition, as it happens in the case explored above – a fact, this one, that the quoted scene of the movie in and of itself already hints at (see also Sedgwick, 1994). More often than not, for Sam himself, it was exactly the easy clockability of his young, moving body – which could not be made to fit into the script of normative gender expectations, if not under constant effort and great pain – to become the primary site for the social and familial sanction that would be inflicted upon him. In Sam's recollection of his childhood and early adolescence, for instance, his own body – laden with effeminacy-leaning gestures and movements, and frequently oriented towards feminine company and feminine-coded occupations – offered an easily-accessible ground for frequent operations of gender policing, mostly enacted by the other men of his family in an attempt to stifle and correct the candid sprouts of femininity that he was beginning to display. What follows is an extract of the only recorded interview-like interaction that Sam and I shared at the very beginning of our research relationality, where Sam describes exactly this scenario (interview, 07/23):

S: [W]hen I was born, I used to play with my sister. You can say she was a good friend. Also, there was a cousin. But I also liked to play with my cousin. Mostly with toys... She, She's... I know she has the wood box with the makeup and some pictures and, you know, small, small things. I remember that box: we used to play with this box and her toys, and after some time I started playing with her friends. And, you know, you can say my body language [was] also like... Like her. But there was a difference, but I don't know at that time what that is. But later on, my friends, my parents also complain about this, that you should behave like a boy, you are a boy! [...] Because... Even the parents did not take that seriously at that time, but they said: "No, you are... You should go play with the male cousin and the boys. Go out, always sitting with your cousin and her friends is not good!" But at that time, it was not that serious. But at a later stage, it became very serious and sometimes they used very strict language with me. And my father, I remember, he... He used to say that: "You should walk like this!". He took me to his friends, the male friends. He wanted to create a male environment around me, so I become more muscular and... You know?

As his words illustrate, Sam's embodiments of effeminacy constituted rather risky modalities of being in the world, as they potentially subjected him to more or less intrusive and violent acts of policing and repression⁷⁴. At the same time, they were also grounds on which Sam had little to no control over. He could hide what he felt inside, he told me one day (fieldnotes, 11/23), but his outer body would betray him all the time. The way he talked, the way he walked, the way he moved – what in the interview he defined as "his body language": all of it would make him a target of repeated and unwanted attempts at masculinization. "I could be a man for a couple of hours" – he would also succinctly yet powerfully add in another occasion – "but not all the time" (fieldnotes, 11/23).

Sam's reconstruction of his own childhood experiences of gender defiance thus collides with the post-migration micro-dynamic explored earlier. In the latter, in fact, Sam's bodily movements, albeit ambivalently, function as a vehicle to more or less voluntarily signal, to an understanding eye, a shared baggage of 'queerness': perhaps a presumed and partial one, but, in any case, one that does not get refused. Importantly, they do so exactly by virtue of being visible and recognizable. The easiest, most immediate conclusion that this way of framing the discourse might seem to be pointing to is, thereby, one where the act of relocating to Italy comes to mark, for Sam, a passage from the imperative to repress his effeminate gestures, to the freedom to tap into them as avenues for self-acceptance, identity-construction, and relationality-building. Even though not necessarily wrong per se, I nonetheless want to suggest that this perspective obscures more than it reveals. First of all, it is a rather simplistic and partial way of framing the whole scenario, and one which actively erases the

⁷⁴ By violent, here I do not necessarily mean physically violent. Sam repeatedly made it a point to stress that his parents never hurt him, and that, according to him, parents cannot possibly hurt, or want to hurt, their children. As he often stated, what they did to him was for his own good: a way to protect him from society and the sanction he would have otherwise been meted with. By specifying this, I do not wish to downplay the seriousness of Sam's suffering, but rather to make explicit the strategies that he employs to understand it and imbue it with meaning.

simple fact that in a country like Italy, too, the hyper-visibility of effeminacy – and of queerness more broadly, not to mention queerness embodied from a racialized positionality such as Sam’s – often goes hand in hand with a heightened risk for societal ostracism and violence, not necessarily dissimilar from those experienced by Sam himself in Pakistan (see e.g., Callahan and Loscocco, 2021; Castro and Carnassale, 2019). The movie scene quoted by the social worker and thence employed to amicably mock Sam into a confirmation of his gayness, after all, constitutes nothing other than a cinematic depiction of the societal imperative, in the ‘West’, too, to cover up gayness by means of quelling its most insidious and most detectable symptom: effeminacy (see also Sedgwick, 1994). Even more so, however, such a framing entirely misses the point that this discussion wants to make. What I deem of the most relevance here – and what, incidentally, tends instead to remain quite opaque in most available scholarly discussions of queer migrations, at least in those revolving around the Italian context (see Introduction, Section II) – is not so much the abovementioned shift *per se*⁷⁵, but rather what lies behind this shift in the first place: that is to say, the complex epistemological reworkings which go into the making of this apparent/temporary shift; the movements – both physical and epistemological – which have to happen for such a shift to occur in the first place. In other words, the aforementioned *how* of the meaning of bodily movement (Thomas, 1995, in Cresswell, 2006): *how* do effeminate gestures mean for Sam? And *how* do they come to mean how they mean? Rather than, and/or in addition to, simply *what* do they mean? Perhaps unsurprisingly, an up-close and long-term engagement with these questions makes for the inevitable implosion of the simplistic, dichotomic image of Sam’s migration journey as a movement from a homophobic Pakistan to a LGBT-friendly Italy, from repressing to embracing his gay subjectivity. In fact, it restores an image of Sam’s journey of gender and sexual defiance which is perhaps better described as resembling an imperfect circularity – frayed in places and still open-ended –, rather than a neat, teleological linearity (see further on in the chapter, Section 2.2.3.). In order to understand why, it is to Sam’s own shapeshifting epistemologies of ‘queerness’ in and across migration that I now turn.

⁷⁵ For one thing, the episode analyzed earlier is too small and entangled in layers of mediation to serve as a reliable enough window to assess, once and for all, Sam’s entrance into his (effeminate) gay identity *thanks to* his migratory journey to Italy. Additionally, as I would come to apprehend with time, that of Sam’s identification with (a very specific script of) gayness would turn out to be if not a merely temporary stage in his life, at least a much more fraught question than what the anecdote manages to show, especially when apprehended as an isolated episode in time and space. See further on in this chapter, Section 2.2.3.

2.2.1. Man? Khusra? Gay? Of Readings and Misreadings

Throughout our field and non-field interactions – spanning, albeit intermittently, over the course of more than a year and a half, from July 2023 to March 2025⁷⁶ – Sam gradually discloses to me his own composite system for making sense of the gender/sexuality framework in its entirety: one that he relies on to apprehend, interpret, and attribute meaning to the realms of sexual and gender defiance, and to consequently and accordingly shape his understanding of himself as well. Crucially, Sam’s is a system that consolidates, but also shapeshifts, across the different times and spaces that he finds himself traversing during his pre- and post-migration life. At the very beginning of our research relationality, however, these discourses quite straightforwardly take the form of an explicit critique of the way all things gender-related – the “gender system” in Sam’s words (interview 07/23) – work in Pakistan. According to Sam, Pakistan’s entire framework of gender and sexuality rests on what can be codified, starting off from his words, as one big *mistake*: the misapprehension of those individuals who ‘should’ be regarded as ‘gay men’ as, instead, inevitably belonging to the culturally-intelligible, yet extremely ostracized realm of the ‘third gender’ – this one, in turn, invoked by Sam through the Urdu expression *khwaja sara*, i.e., the more politically-correct label currently widespread in Pakistan to refer to those collectivities otherwise coming together across South Asia under the broader banner of ‘hijra’ (Khan, 2014; 2019; see also Khan, 2016)⁷⁷.

Broadly speaking, the term ‘hijra’ stands to indicate typically South Asian communities of male-born, feminine-identified people who live together in hierarchically structured, family-like social arrangements, and earn their living through distinct professions such as ritualized blessing and dance performances during weddings and childbirths, but also, and ever more frequently, through begging and sex work (Dutta and Roy, 2014; see also e.g., Hossain, 2018; Khan, 2014a; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). While dressing in typically feminine attire and sometimes undergoing ritual castration, hijras often define their identity as separate from both men and women (Dutta and Roy, 2014; see Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005): as the title of the famous, pioneering ethnography by Serena Nanda (1999) recites, as “neither men nor women” (for a partial revision of this optic, see Reddy, 2005). In popular discourses all across South Asia, however, the label is mostly understood as derogatory: strictly referring to lower-class people, and almost automatically invoking ideas of non-respectability and deficient masculinity (Hossain, 2019a). Additionally believed to possess the power to bless and curse,

⁷⁶ My engagement with Sam did not stop in March 2025. In fact, we are still in touch at the time of writing. However, the dynamics and episodes discussed in this thesis are ones that happened, for the most part, within the timeframe stated above.

⁷⁷ In Pakistan, the label ‘khwaja sara’ began to circulate more widely again from the early 2000s onwards, largely due to transgender activists who adopted it as a more respectful identity term to replace ‘hijra’, a word mostly perceived as derogatory, if not outright as an insult. Even so, hijra remains in use within khwaja sara circles. Additionally, some activists have also begun identifying as ‘transgender’, a term that they encountered and embraced mostly through their involvement in HIV/AIDS outreach programs (Khan, 2014b).

hijras yield extremely ambivalent reactions at the societal level (Khan, 2014b): their ambiguous physical features, together with their powers, make them figures able to provoke fear and disgust, but also curiosity and fascination among the general public (see Saria, 2021), while coterminously determining their overall exclusion from mainstream society as a whole (Khan, 2014b). As pointed out by anthropologist Gayatry Reddy, by virtue of their highly culturally-legible aura, hijras have come to represent “metonymic figures of Indian [but, I would add, South Asian more broadly] sexual difference” (2005, p. 2), hyper-visible and invisibilized at the same time. As the discussion will now clarify, in the case of Sam, not only do ‘third-gender’ individuals elicit just-as-ambivalent sentiments, but they also end up functioning as the embodied and discursive grounds against which subjectivation and dis/identification happen for him.

What follows is another excerpt from my interview with Sam (07/23), where he quite directly expounds to me this point of view of his, regarding Pakistan’s gender system at large:

S: [W]hen I was... Like, you could say, mmm... Eleven, twelve, thirteen, I feel like a difference in my, you know, my... My... In my feelings toward my same gender, not to the opposite gender, because I... I remember I was in school...

V: Yeah...

S: And I... I feel like a girl, you can say [pauses]... I feel like a girl... Not even the girl! I just feel like... It is all normal for me. Not a boy, not a girl. Because at that time, I don’t know about the gender system in my society. It is specific... There is two specific genders, like man and woman, and the third one is, in my language, Urdu, you can say *khwaja sara*. Khwaja sara is a transgender, you can say. Basically, the real khwaja sara is not a man, even not a woman, so they are third-gender. If you read about the khwaja sara they are also in our history, but... [...] But there are more cases, like, the person is a fully man physically, but mentally he is... He thinks... He doesn’t want... He doesn’t attract [he is not attracted] to the opposite gender. So, in my society, people also call him khwaja sara. *But this is not the reality, because the person who is mentally attracted to the same gender, that is called a gay*. So, I’m trying to say to you, in my society, people do not know about the gender, that their definition of the gender. They only know about the men and women, and if there is something... Other thing that a person likes – if two girls like each other, or if boys like each other – they always say the khwaja sara, because khwaja sara is a different thing. But the gay is a different thing. So, you can say, *in my society there is no existence of a gay*, especially for a person who is physically born a man, he is completely a man, he cannot say that he is a khwaja sara and he is a gay, because they think if you are a gay that you [are] physically not a man or... There, it should be different, you know? So, basically, the point is: they don’t know, they don’t have the knowledge of this.

Summing up, according to Sam’s perspective, in Pakistan there appears to exist a *conflation* between (male) gayness/homosexuality⁷⁸, on the one hand, and third-genderism/intersexuality/trans-

⁷⁸ In the interview quoted above, Sam also mentions girls loving girls, but his overarching argument is nonetheless clearly referring to male-bodied people and hijras only. When it comes women, lesbians, and trans-men, the issue at stake is sensibly different, and nowhere near as explored in literature as that of men and/or ‘male-bodied’ people more broadly.

femininity, on the other – a conflation so pervasive that it eventually ends up erasing the possibility for the subject position of the ‘gay man’ to even exist in the first place. That is to say, in Pakistani popular imagination – at least as experienced, mobilized, and recounted to me by Sam⁷⁹ – gayness can only be conceived of in terms of a biological deficiency that un-males you and that makes you assimilable to the culturally intelligible, yet socially ostracized realm of hijraness, in turn mis/understood as referring to a collectivity of people who are *biologically* ‘neither man nor women’. Stripped to the bone, the dominant logic in Pakistan, as expounded and contextually criticized by Sam, would roughly read as follows: you cannot be gay because you are a man; alternatively, if you are a man, then you are not, and cannot possibly be, gay. Importantly enough, it is a stance where sexual acts and behaviors play little to no role at all. Sex between men is, indeed, a fairly widespread occurrence in both Pakistan and South Asia more broadly, without it necessarily implying nor producing identity-coded sexual subjectivities, rooted in an ontology of personhood: what akshay khanna (2007) describes as ‘sexuality types’, and most globalized mainstream lgbt+ activism assumes as its implicit referents (see also khanna, 2016)⁸⁰. It is, rather, the body to act as the pivot of this line of thinking about the realm of the sexual. To put it bluntly, if you have a penis and your penis works properly; if your body and the embellishments you cover it with look like those of other men; or, even, if you are not utterly effeminate, then you are not gay: you are a man. However, if you somehow fail masculinity at one or more of these levels, then you are not gay either: you are a khwaja sara, a hijra, a *khusra*, even – the last one being the most offensive iteration to invoke third-gender individuals in Pakistan⁸¹; according to Sam, possibly one of the worst existing words in the whole of the Urdu and Punjabi languages. It thus exactly in these exchanges that ‘gay’ as a subject position and a sexuality type disappears, coming to occupy a space of utter discursive and material impossibility (see Hossain and Rahman, 2024). In other words, the Pakistani gay male subject, understood as a male-bodied, self-identified man who desires and is sexually/romantically (“mentally” in Sam’s words) attracted to other male-bodied self-identified men, disappears from discourse before he can even come into being. As Sam reiterates in another occasion, “Gay doesn’t exist in Pakistan. Even the gays think that they

⁷⁹ This caveat is crucial as I am not aiming to represent the entire Pakistani view of the sexuality and gender framework, but exclusively the understanding and deployment of it provided to me by Sam.

⁸⁰ Needless to say, not all of queer activism and discourses across the globe would imply such an understanding. A radical queer approach to gender/sexuality, for instance, would not. Suffice it to think on this regard that a label such as ‘lesbian’, for instance, counts for many not as a descriptor of sexual orientation only, but rather as encompassing the realm of gender, too. Concomitantly, for many people being a trans man and a lesbian do not have to necessarily exclude each other, but can rather coexist. For a critical discussion of the history and implications of the institutionalization of gender and sexuality as two distinct, albeit communicating categories, see Valentine, 2004. For a much wider discussion of the issue with specific reference to the category ‘transgender’, see Valentine, 2011.

⁸¹ Khusra is a word mostly widespread in the Pakistani province of Punjab, where it almost invariably has a very negative connotation – way more negative than the already-insulting ‘hijra’ itself, in fact. If compared to its usage in Pakistan, ‘hijra’ assumes a slightly more neutral connotation in India, where it nonetheless gets inflected in numerous other locally-, region- and sometimes religion-specific variances (e.g., kinnar, aravani, and more).

are not gay” (fieldnotes, 04/24). This last stance also resonates with the longer personal history of Sam’s own sentiments towards the subject position and label ‘gay’ itself, which, for a long time, he could not bring himself to relate to, not least because of the alleged systemic ‘glitch’ in the Pakistani gender/sexuality framework described so far; but also because of the strict religious education that he received all throughout his life, and his own deepfelt religious sentiments. Born and raised, as Sam was, in a devout Muslim family and “practicing as a strong Muslim believer” (interview, 07/23), religion is another actor that he frequently brings up when describing both his own complicated relation to sexual/gender defiance, as well as Pakistan’s broader critical stance against it. It is, however, less an element that he strives to renounce and leave behind in migration, than one he cannot but wish to reconcile with his own romantic sentiments and sexual desires⁸². At the very beginning of our research relationality, when Sam has been living in Italy for less than a year, these are the words that he uses to give voice to these complex sentiments towards the word ‘gay’ itself (interview, 07/23):

S: Even... I’m in Italy, but sometimes I feel that something is wrong because if you spend thirty... more than thirty years in a society where you also try to say: “No, I’m not a gay”, but actually you were a gay... If you are denied just because you also think that this is not a good thing... So, I’m here. Now I can use this word for me that “I’m a gay”, but the problem is: still there is something, like confusion. Not the confusion, but something wrong. I cannot explain how to say this right now, but... Sometimes I feel it’s because it’s my first education when I was a kid. So how can I change myself quickly? It will take some time to, you know...

As the discussion carried out so far started to illuminate, the apparently straightforward snapshot of the Pakistani gender system taken by Sam, as well as Sam’s own consequent oppositional inclination against it, are far from uncomplicated, transparent matters. They both result, in fact, from the coming together, and against, of several discursive and material terrains, where not only different approaches to gender and sexuality, but, crucially and coterminously, also class, religion, and related ideals of respectability, decency, and rightness, all come to play a substantive role.

On top of it all, as I have already mentioned in passing above, the underlying assumption of this whole discursive building is one that mis/reads the figure of the khwaja sara/hijra herself as one strictly resulting from a physical, biological ‘disorder’ (Nisar, 2022; Plummer and Kazmi, 2021; see also Hossain, 2019a, for analogous arguments about the Bangladeshi context): that of being born as

⁸² As Sam’s story begins to testify to, religion – and Islam more specifically – played a crucial role in the lives of most participants in this research, more often than not as a fundamental component of their existences, rather than exclusively as an oppressive force on their sexual/gendered selves. Unfortunately, an in-depth discussion of the nuanced relationality linking Islam and queerness/homosexuality – both from a theoretical perspective and with reference to the specific relationship to faith and religious education presented by each participant – remained outside the scope of this thesis, although being crucial for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the life and migration trajectories of the individuals involved in the present research. For an initial theoretical exploration of the topic, see Habib 2010; Hamzić 2016; Kugle 2010; Yip 2018; Zahed 2020.

neither a physical man, nor a physical woman, but of rather embodying what modern medical discourse would identify as an intersex subjectivity. Indeed, when I further probe Sam to understand what, according to him, would amount as the main difference between ‘gay’ and ‘khwaja sara’, he replies by stating that “the khwaja sara is *physically* [stressed] born not of completely man and not of completely woman” (interview, 07/23), thus referring it all back to a realm of physical, biological difference from what counts as both a male and a female body. This stance virtually coincides with the most widespread understanding, among the Pakistani mainstream public, of who the ‘real’⁸³ members of third-gender/khwaja sara/hijra communities are, as well as with the framing that is being made of them within the Pakistani legal system (Nisar, 2022; Plummer and Kazmi, 2021)⁸⁴. No doubt, layered discourses of realness and authenticity are widespread also inside khwaja sara collectivities themselves, where they contribute to structure both internal hierarchies among members of a single group, as well as external relationalities with other khwaja sara households (see e.g., Khan, 2014a, and Nisar, 2022 on the Pakistani context; Reddy, 2005, and Saria, 2021 with reference to India). The material reality of Pakistan’s khwaja sara communities, however, matches this bodily-rooted rationale only in part. As explored by Faris Ahmed Khan (2014a; 2014b; 2016; 2019b) through his in-depth anthropological engagement with khwaja sara networks and collectivities in Karachi, even though univocal consensus on who should be understood as khwaja sara is still lacking, and the label functions nowadays mostly as an umbrella term pointing to “several overlapping sex and gender subcategories” (Khan, 2016, p. 3), three are the groups that are generally acknowledged as being invoked by the label: “individuals with congenital genital irregularities (*khunsa*), feminine males who situationally cross-dress (*zennana*), and *zennanas* who excise their male genitalia and assume a more permanent feminine presentation (*hijra*)” (pp. 3-4). Among them, however, those who would count as intersex – hence, those who are believed to embody the ‘real’ khwaja sara positionality in much of the Pakistani public and legal imaginary – constitute a miniscule minority, and hardly ever, if at all, become part of khwaja sara households and networks (Khan, 2014b). Sam’s standpoint thus conveys a widespread etic perspective on the material realities of local communities of Pakistan’s “gender

⁸³ On top of being a recurring theme in ethnographic work on hijras (see e.g., Reddy, 2005; Saria, 2021), that of ‘realness’ – of who counts as a ‘real’ hijra and who doesn’t – is an idea also frequently invoked by Sam himself. See, for instance, his words in the interview quoted above.

⁸⁴ Indeed, in 2009, Pakistan’s Supreme Court officially recognized hijras as a ‘third gender’ in *Khaki v. Rawalpindi*, a decision widely hailed as a landmark moment in the juridical acknowledgment of gender diversity in Pakistan. The ruling, however, framed hijras’ marginalization in terms of a purported ‘gender disorder’, thereby grounding recognition within a medicalizing logic, and further instructed state authorities – including the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) – to verify applicants’ gender status through medical assessment (Plummer and Kazmi, 2021). The introduction of a third-gender category by NADRA under the designation ‘Khwaja Sira’ thus soon revealed its limits (Nisar, 2022). Indeed, the new classification did little to alter the material precarity experienced by many khwaja sara individuals, some of whom distanced themselves from the bureaucratically-codified category (ibid.). The ruling thus exemplifies the ambivalence that often accompanies state recognition: juridical inclusion coupled with intensified medicalization and administrative regulation, thus exposing the persistent gap separating formal acknowledgment and lived realities.

ambiguous people” (Khan, 2014a, p. 2): an apprehension of the realm of the khwaja sara/hijra that stems from a decidedly outside and outsider positionality. To be precise, such an act of collective third-gender mis/reading is one that gets harnessed, if not entirely fostered, first and foremost by khwaja sara community members themselves, who take up gender/sex ambiguity as one of the main tools at their disposal to resist unwanted obtrusion from the public and surveillance from the state (Khan, 2014a; 2016; see also Hossain, 2019a on Bangladesh)⁸⁵. That of being misread and of consequently remaining opaque to the external, often hostile and thus unwelcome gaze of others, also by promoting, or by not intervening to debunk, the myth about their intersexuality⁸⁶, constitutes, in fact, the result of a conscious strategy enacted by khwaja sara networks in the first place, in order to protect their own interests and safety (Khan, 2014a; 2019b). Here, I hence do not want to suggest that this operation should be read as an inherently negative process to be condemned. Rather, I want to make clear that, at this juncture of the analysis, I am tapping into this misapprehension specifically – and thus inevitably partially – for the additional role that it plays in informing broader popular understandings of gender and sexuality in Pakistan, at least as they get mobilized and conveyed to me by Sam.

When it comes to Sam, however, another extra layer comes to further complicate the picture drawn so far. If it is true that Sam’s reconstruction of the workings of the Pakistani framework of gender and sexuality is one highly dependent on a mis/apprehension of hijraness that can happen only as long as the one who operates it is positioned unequivocally outside the realm of hijraness itself – outside the quotidian, material webs of relationalities and kinship that make up hijra/khwaja sara households –, it is also true that Sam’s is an outside fraught, at the same time, with the looming threat of adjacency (see Mount, 2020)⁸⁷. His barely-repressed effeminacy, in fact, constantly puts him at risk of crossing over to the other side of manhood, the ‘wrong’ one: hijraness, and, by extension, non-manhood tout court. The constant throwing at him of the ‘khusra’ derogatory label from family members and other acquaintances, especially throughout his younger years (fieldnotes, 11/23; 04/24; 02/25), testifies exactly to this. This same threat of proximity can additionally be understood as lying at the heart of two

⁸⁵ On this regard, see Khan, 2014a, p. 10: “Similarly, the relationships of khwaja siras with ordinary people relied on the latter’s limited and distorted understanding of the former. Khwaja siras’ ability to deceive outsiders was grounded in the partial and often erroneous knowledge—comprised primarily of myths and stereotypes—that the general public had of them.”

⁸⁶ As well as the myth of their asexuality, as it happens in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2019a).

⁸⁷ This adjacency, too, is class-inflected. Sam belongs to a lower middle-class milieu, which puts him in the following uncomfortable position: close enough for hijraness to enter the picture of his life as a looming threat, but not enough for it to become a comfortable outlet for him to inhabit, as it is, for instance, for Atif. As Liz Mount (2020) compellingly points out against the backdrop of her own research with trans women in India, it is often working-class trans women who express the most anxiety towards being mistakenly conflated with hijras “partly because of their similarities in class location” (p. 622). Furthermore, Sam is able to navigate certain spaces of homosexual sociality, like dating apps, and groups on social media, but at the same time struggles with identifying with the ‘gay’ category (while also feeling like he *has to* identify with the category).

of Sam's biggest life decisions: that of getting married – incidentally, a facet of his life which he discloses to me only at a later stage of our research relationality – and, almost consequentially, that of getting out of Pakistan. The pressure to remain within the confines of manhood – enhanced by the fact that failing to do so would have resulted not so much in homosexuality, as in crossing over to *khusraness* tout court – becomes, at one point, so stifling that Sam caves in and does the 'manliest' thing of all: he marries a woman, has sex with her, and has a baby. This extremely suffered turn that his life takes – what Sam later reframes to me as one of the major turning points of his existence, as well as "a regret" (fieldnotes, 04/24) – is, in turn, what fuels his final decision to leave Pakistan and begin the journey that, eventually, brings him to Italy. Curbed by the sexual and familiar responsibilities forced upon him by his newfound position as family man, upon the pretext of having found a more remunerative job in the Gulf, Sam takes advantage exactly of this new manly, breadwinner role of his – the same that he wanted to escape – and leaves Pakistan behind.

As the discussion carried out so far has shown, Sam's precarious dwelling on the thin line that separates man from non-man – the impossible space of the Pakistani gay male subject, according to his reconstruction – percolates in, and gives shape to, several significant aspects of his existence: it informs his understanding of both the Pakistani gender/sexual universe as a whole, as well as of his own place within it; it prompts his decision to marry first, and leave Pakistan soon after; but it is also, I want to suggest, what allows his subsequent, albeit temporary re/joining with the identity category 'gay', once he is both epistemologically and geographically far removed from the risky proximity to *khusraness* that would haunt him back home – that is to say, after the onset of migration to Italy. Always on the brink of surpassing the limits of manhood, yet also paradoxically prevented to do so by his own male physiology while in Pakistan, once he arrives in Italy and begins to engage with the tortuous process of claiming asylum on grounds of his sexual orientation, Sam begins to fill up this locally-inflected space of homosexual impossibility – but also, in a way, to produce it and understand it as an impossibility in the first place – exactly through gayness. And, specifically, through gayness as it gets mobilized and conceptualized by those fringes of Italian mainstream LGBT+ activism that accompany him throughout the asylum application procedure. That is to say, gayness as a subject position rooted in an ontology of personhood, entailing a male-bodied man-identified subject who desires and romantically and/or sexually pursues other male-bodied man-identified subjects.

It is exactly at this juncture, I finally argue, that Sam's involuntarily-raised, upward-facing, and gay-coded pinky comes back into the frame. Looked at from this angle, both the social worker's reading of Sam's raised pinky as a confirmation of his homosexuality and, even more crucially so, Sam's embrace/non-refusal of this reading can be understood as the visible symptoms of the complex internal, yet at the same time deeply relational, reworkings of 'queerness' that Sam has been operating

throughout his migratory trajectory. In other words, as the tip of the iceberg of a much more profound discursive renegotiation that Sam has been carrying out both in relation to his own self, and to gender and sexual defiance more broadly. As mentioned at the beginning of the discussion, it is a renegotiation premised on blunt disavowal: a disavowal that leaves behind as its main casualty the Pakistani ‘gender system’ at large – at least, Sam’s apprehension of what, to him, counts as the Pakistani gender system. According to Sam’s initial post-migration viewpoint, in fact, not only among Pakistani people there would be no ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ knowledge of how gender works – of what gender *is* in the first place, one could even say. The Pakistani gender and sexuality framework as a whole would also be reframed as wrong, false, as a blunt misapprehension of *reality* – of what reality actually is and of how reality actually works⁸⁸. In turn, this tortuous journey of disavowal-cum-resignification of Pakistan’s gender and sexual continuum through a language of wrongness is exactly what can be understood to lie behind Sam’s (temporary) embracing, if not in an explicitly affirmative way, at least somewhat nonchalantly, of the social worker’s ironic inscription of gayness on him through the clocking of an effeminate gesture – perhaps, what counts as the ‘West’s’ effeminate gesture par excellence: the gay-coded upward-facing, raised pinky (see Gere, 2001). Manifesting itself through and around the micro-movement of a small and otherwise rather inconsequential part of the human body – through the meaning that gets attached to it, and through the non-refusal of that same meaning –, it is a disavowal necessary for Sam to (temporarily) come into being as a gay subject, if not even as a subject tout court. In the new epistemological and geographical space that Sam has come to inhabit – a space where the label ‘gay’ summons a specific sexuality type, attached, in turn, to a specific framework for understanding gender and sexuality more broadly – embodying effeminacy does not transport him anymore into the ‘infamous’ realm of hijraness as it would have done, instead, in Pakistan⁸⁹. In this new milieu, the meaning attached to effeminacy is, rather, one that implies homosexuality, and the meaning attached to homosexuality is, in turn, one that implies physical manhood. *For*

⁸⁸ As already extensively clarified throughout the discussion, at least during the initial stages of his life in Italy first as an asylum claimant, first, and then as a recognized refugee, Sam would voice a very precise and stern argument against the workings of Pakistan’s gender/sexuality continuum, and, more specifically, against the conflation of ‘gay’ with ‘non-man’ on which, according to him, the entire system comes to rest. Not without a generous amount of contempt, he would straight-forwardly state that such a conflation does not constitute the reality – “But this is not the reality, because the person who is mentally attracted to the same gender, that is called a gay” (interview, 07/23). Which is to say that gender – and by implication, also sexuality – do not actually work in this way. And yet, according to Sam, people in Pakistan do not know any better, they “do not have any knowledge of this” (interview, 07/23). As shown above, these conclusions build on, and intermingle with, Sam’s experienced sense of impossibility to make sense of himself – of his bodily movements, his desires, his inclinations – without risking being transported to a realm, that of hijraness, that not only he perceives as extremely distant from him and as unable to account for the material reality of his own body and self; but also that, from his ‘respectable’ class and social positionality, he very much despises and fears. See further on in the discussion, Section 2.2.2.

⁸⁹ Crucially, this does not imply that effeminacy – and visible queerness more broadly – is not sanctioned in Italy. It very much is. It is, however, a sanction nonetheless devoid of all the implications associated to hijraness, which prove extremely risky for him, especially in terms of class-inflected respectability.

now, Sam can raise his pinky while drinking from a cup⁹⁰ – by extension, he can also let slip out all of those girlish mannerisms he used to be reproached for – and still be a man. A gay, effeminate man, but a man nonetheless.

2.2.2. A Parenthesis: There's Life Beyond Disavowal

Before carrying on with the assessment of another further substantial set of changes, occurring in Sam's understanding of both himself and gender/sexuality more broadly during subsequent phases of his life in Italy, here in this section, I want to pause for a moment and further dwell on the terms through which the initial re-conceptualizations analyzed above take shape. In the epistemological reworkings of the gender/sexuality system that Sam attempts during the initial stages of his newly-established life in Italy, he mobilizes concepts such as 'reality' and 'ignorance', which are not without consequences – and of the sort that go well beyond his individual right and capacity to make sense of his own self. Albeit implicitly and inadvertently, Sam's is an operation that both rests on, and entails the production of a hierarchy of authenticity and validity, whereby one modality of understanding gender and sexuality becomes the correct one, and the others get instead consequently reframed as, quite simply, *wrong*. The moment that Sam, in order to (temporarily) come into being as a gay subject, disavows the 'conflation' of gay into khwaja sara as a misconception, a sheer misapprehension of reality – of the reality of how gender and sexuality work, but, crucially, also of gender and sexuality, understood as referring to two distinct spheres of selfhood, *as* the reality –, he is also more or less implicitly relying on discourses that erase the possibility that such a 'conflation' might, instead, represent precisely *the reality* of someone else. To borrow from Kareem Khubchandani's (2020, pp. xxi-xxii) terminology, Sam's can be read as one among many cases of "disavowed homosexualities": a homosexuality, that is to say, that comes into being through the abjection of hijraness; through the clear separation and distancing of hijraness from the body of the homosexual man, in a move to more or less programmatically "secure gender, class, and caste privilege" (ibid.). By underlining this, I do not want to invalidate Sam's personal journey of self-resignification, neither do I want to deem him personally responsible for all-together discrediting allegedly 'dissonant' embodiments of the gendered and/or the sexual, that do not fit an ontologically-inflected framework of sexuality-as-personhood (see khanna, 2007; 2016). In fact, I recognize the importance that this operation of resignification holds to him – or, at least, *held* for him at a very specific juncture of his migratory trajectory –, as well as to potentially many other individuals who share, or have shared, similar conundrums to

⁹⁰ The effeminate gesture is perhaps different, perhaps not – or, at least, not-so-much. What matters is that effeminacy can coexist with gayness, and gayness can coexist with maleness.

Sam's in their journeys towards self-understanding (see e.g., the case of several of the interlocutors of Khubchandani, 2020). However, neither do I want to uncritically reproduce, through this work, the specifically class-inflected narrative of authenticity that Sam's stance rests/rested upon. There exist in fact, both in this research and beyond it, numerous other 'realities' that this narrative fails to make sense of. It is precisely in an attempt to begin accounting for them, too, that I momentarily move away from Sam, and broaden the purview of this section to the story of another primary participant in this research: Atif, a young Pakistani in her early twenties who reaches Italy through the Central Mediterranean route at the end of 2022, and who also obtains refugee status on grounds of her sexual orientation – i.e., by way of being read, by Italian authorities, as 'gay' (as in: 'gay boy'), exactly like Sam.

Atif's personal life-trajectory differs from Sam's in many respects: she is significantly younger and, contrary to Sam, she does not get the chance to pursue her higher education in Pakistan; she comes from a sensibly lower-class background; and, finally, she presents a whole set of strategies of self-identification, which function exactly by way of blurring those boundaries between gay and transgender/hijra that Sam struggles so much to reassert, and whose 'conflation' he eventually re-frames as 'wrong' and a symptom of people's lack of knowledge about how gender works. Significantly enough on this regard, while still living in Pakistan, Atif spends substantial chunks of her life as a member of what she would describe to me as local 'she-male' (i.e., khwaja sara/hijra) groups, albeit personally identifying herself with the Punjabi gendered/sexual positionality of the 'murat' (Sharma, 2018), rather than with either the 'hijra' or 'khwaja sara' realms more directly. The term 'murat' (pl. '*muratan*') indicates "a distinct vernacular identity" (Sharma, 2018, p. 18), widespread in both the Indian and Pakistani regions of Punjab, among people who, albeit being assigned male at birth, understand themselves as possessing an inner feminine identity, but have not, or not yet been initiated to a hijra household. Muratan also share additional social, sexual, and gendered attributes: they are the receptive partners in sex and only desire straight, masculine men willing to perform the active role with them; they live in proximity to 'hijra' (khwaja sara in Pakistan, kinnar in India) households, albeit not necessarily renouncing to their place within their biological families; and, finally, they often nurture a desire to eventually transition to a 'woman' or a 'hijra' identity themselves (ibid.). As Sophiya Sharma (2018) points out, however, the murat identity cannot be exhausted via a reference to gender/sexuality alone. Rather, it is a marker that thrives both in a class-specific and a regionally-sanctioned realm of aesthetics and practices, respectively lower-class and Punjabi⁹¹. And indeed, muratan's consciously exaggerated femininity and mannerisms are fully immersed into shared regional visual and sonic imaginaries – of filmi womanhood, of mujra-style dance (see further on in

⁹¹ In her Master thesis, Sharma (2018) refers specifically to Indian muratan, but also highlights the frequent incursions occurring between Pakistani and Indian Punjab, exactly by virtue of a shared regional imaginary and cultural milieu, cutting across nation-state borders.

this thesis, Section 2.3.1.), of Sufi devotional music, among other things – which are “embedded in the cultural universe of Punjab” (p. 19).

This is, extremely summarized, the social/sexual/gendered background against which Atif moves, before migration⁹²: one filled in equal measure with recognition from peers, and violence from societal and familial actors. After being quite literally *seen* in her own gender defiance by elder members of khwaja sara households in her hometown while still a kid, during her teenage years Atif runs away from her house multiple times, always in an attempt to join ‘she-male’ circles in nearby cities. Each time, however, she is forcefully brought back home by her strict family members, and harshly punished for these outings, both verbally and physically. According to Atif’s reconstruction of her trajectory of migration, it is eventually her she-male friends – especially her guru – who financially contribute to the actualization of her migratory journey away from Pakistan, first to Libya and eventually to Italy: Atif’s ultimate attempt, this one, at evading the circles of physical and discursive violence that her life had been made to revolve around up until that point, by family members, unfaithful lovers (all ‘*dhokebāz*’, ‘cheater’, all ‘*kutte*’, ‘dogs’), police officers, and strangers, too. In the specificity of this regional context, her material proximity with ‘hijra’ households and kinship networks constitutes the result of both Atif’s class positionality and inner feelings of gender-elusion, which, together, render the realm of ‘hijraness’ – via the embodiment of a murat identity – a concrete, available option for the unfolding of her life, and not, as it had been the case for Sam, a looming threat to her alleged manhood. In turn, these experiences are what actively shape, in migration, Atif’s self-identifications as – sometimes alternatively, other times coterminously – gay, she-male, transgender, murat, *larkī* (girl), or, even, *ādhā* transgender *ādhā* gay (lit. ‘half transgender half gay’), in ways that patently blur the contested boundaries between the categories ‘gay’ and ‘transgender’ themselves, but also those between gender and sexuality tout court, as the rest of the discussion will further attempt to clarify.

Given that Atif represents the participant I have engaged the most frequently, the most in-depth, and across the most diverse array of spaces with, the abovementioned ‘conflation’ is one that has infallibly percolated throughout our research relationality, making itself known through extremely varied, often creative modalities. As such, it will thus repeatedly surface throughout the pages of this work, as both object of analysis and faithful ethnographic companion to this research enterprise as a whole. Here, however, I want to introduce it by focusing on one specific episode during which Atif’s muddling of the borders between ‘male gayness’ and ‘trans womanhood’ – at least, of what to Italy-based, yet globalized lgbt+ discourse would count as such – manifest in a particularly blatant manner: during a meeting taking place at The Rainbow Hub, that involves Atif, Anna (i.e., the social worker

⁹² As subsequent sections of the discussion will show, also in Italy, the aftermath of migration itself. See Chapter Two, Section 2.3.1.

operating The Rainbow Hub's interculturality counter, who had been following Atif's case for the previous year and a half), and – luckily this time – me, attending less to my role as researcher than as cultural mediator and translator.

Ethnographic vignette #2

It has been approximately six months since the last time Atif visited The Rainbow Hub⁹³. That is to say, since he got allotted a place in a SAI project and got transferred there from his CAS, as envisioned by Italy's legal provisions for the reception of refugees. Throughout that time, Atif and I have kept on meeting rather regularly outside the locales of the association, once a week or once every two weeks, depending on our respective commitments. However, as Anna points out, when it comes to her and the other association volunteers, Atif has almost disappeared, systematically eluding her messages and attempts to check on him. The first thing that Anna thus wants to understand is what he has been up to during these months and, even more importantly, what is the reason why he has requested an appointment with them. Atif begins to explain that he does not want to live in his [SAI] camp [*sic*] anymore: he is not comfortable there because the other guests misbehave with him and insult him by telling him that he is a *khusra*. I set out to explain the meaning of the word to Anna, but it is Atif who quickly steps in to translate it for her as 'transgender'. The other camp guests – Atif adds – tell him that if he really is a Muslim, then he cannot act the way he does. They say this specifically while he gets ready and wears make-up, while also verbally abusing him and making fun of him. They also stress that the camp where they are staying is designated to host *men only*: he is not a real man – he is a *khusra*, a transgender – and thus cannot live there with them. Atif reiterates this point several times: it is a camp for boys, and the other guests living there take this fact out on him. These are the reasons why Atif cannot bear to live there any longer, and wants the association to help him find another place.

It is not the first time that I hear Atif giving voice to this kind of complaints, nor that I witness her locating herself within a realm of 'transgender'. For Anna, however, all of it must feel somewhat new, especially given how much time has passed since their last meeting. When it comes to the association's understanding of Atif, in fact, up until that point he had more or less consistently occupied the position of the gay boy, albeit of the particularly gender-defiant kind⁹⁴. To top it all off, today, Atif's narrative is going hand in hand with an additional change which has occurred in her outer appearance and sartorial practices – this one, it is true, only recently: in addition to sporting her usual light layer

⁹³ The episode reported in this vignette takes place in June 2024. Atif had switched camp earlier that year, in January 2024, after having received the positive outcome of her asylum application in August 2023.

⁹⁴ As the rest of the discussion will show, prior to this, there had been at least another attempt at making sense of Atif as transgender by the association's volunteers, but it partially failed.

of make-up – a beautification passage that Atif cannot skip –, she has also started wearing visibly padded bras, which make her chest stick out from underneath her otherwise conventionally masculine t-shirt and jeans look. Upon hearing Atif complaining against such blatant acts of transphobia/effem-inophobia being inflicted against her, all the while proudly sporting a pair of brand-new padded breasts, Anna turns to me, and asks me to ask Atif a very purposeful question: does he/she recognize him/herself as trans? When I ask him in my basic Urdu “*Kya āp khud ko transgender samajhte haiñ?*”, to much disorientation of the volunteer Atif quite simply and rather enthusiastically replies: “Yes, *main gay hūñ!*” (“Yes, I am gay!”). He does so as if it were the most obvious and consequential answer to the question; as if being gay had to automatically be the reason why he was, at the same time, transgender. And obviously so! Why did she even ask? This is what Atif’s tone seems to imply. Clearly, it is not so obvious for Anna, who, puzzled by this reply, tries to insist with another follow-up question: “Ok, but what about your *gender identity* (lit. *identità di genere*) [stressed], instead?”. She does so as if this additional specification might contribute to sort out once and for all the first (alleged) misunderstanding, and not create, instead, other potentially thornier ones. It is in this moment that I suddenly become hyper-aware of the ‘cultural’ bit in the ‘cultural and linguistic mediator’ qualification which defines my role in this interaction, and I thus attempt to come up with a quick justification to Anna of how these things in Pakistan can be rather different from how we are used to think about them here, in Italy. However, I fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of something that, after spending so much time with Atif, to me does not stride as that incoherent anymore, on top of also coming short of translating in Urdu the ‘gender identity’ part of Anna’s follow-up question so that it can (perhaps?) make more sense to Atif himself. Eventually, Anna circumvents the obstacle by redirecting the conversation on the more practical implications that Atif’s identification with the ‘transgender’ label might entail: does he like to wear women’s clothes? Does he want his body to look more feminine? In other words, she gradually tries to understand whether he might desire to embark on a journey of gender-affirming care. In this occasion, however, Atif shows some reluctance on this front. Throughout the meeting, the only procedure that he seems to be truly interested in is laser facial hair removal. Anna explains to him that once he finds a proper job and manages to save some money, he can ask them about it again: they have some conventions with selected centers and they will be able to help him with that.

As this episode begins to uncover, there exist other possibilities for thinking about, speaking of, and being in, one’s own gender/sexual variance, *beyond* the purview of Sam’s strategy of

resignification-cum-disavowal. In fact, Atif's embodiments and languages of sexual/gender defiance quite perfectly encapsulate that same 'wrongness' which Sam decides to reject, and which nonetheless continues to inform not only patterns of discrimination – similar, here, in both Sam's and Atif's case –, but also strategies of self- and community-formation, across Pakistan and South Asia more broadly (Dutta and Roy, 2014), and in migration, too. As Atif's answer to the social worker's enquiry into her gender inclinations testifies to, what to Sam counted as an erasure of the possibility for him to come into being as a (gay) subject, to Atif quite simply represents the way she moves through the world: her being 'gay' also encompasses her being 'transgender' and vice-versa, in ways that do not necessarily have to be made sense of through complex mechanisms of self-resignification. A “Yes, *main gay hūn!*” is enough. By that, I do not want to imply that behind this declaration do not also lie elaborate universes of meaning. In fact, they very much do, as well as concomitant universes of translation, mis/translation, and transposition, which are just as wide. In this respect, suffice it to think that, during the episode recounted above, Atif interacts with, and employs, two extremely globalized identity terms – i.e., transgender and gay –, but does so in a way that comes to alter their taken-for-granted referent: at least, what their taken-for-granted referent is, inside the association room where we are all sitting⁹⁵. In Atif's discourse, transgender (woman?) and gay (man?) – in fact, she never makes the 'woman' and 'man' bits explicit (see also Saria, 2021) – do not necessarily exclude each other. Quite the opposite, they imply each other, and they do so, I argue, because they do not entail an understanding of gender *and* sexuality as the two radically different domains of experience that the coming into being of both 'transgender' and 'gay' have, instead, historically been premised upon, at least across Europe and North America (Valentine, 2007, p. 133).

Albeit speaking to sensibly different times and places (i.e., New York in the 1990s vs South Asian migrations to Italy in the 2020s), David Valentine's (2007) ethnographic engagement with the coming into being and gradual institutionalization of the category 'transgender' proves to be particularly illuminating in this sense. In carrying out what he defines “an ethnography of a category”, Valentine probes into those spaces and lives that, albeit apparently fitting the horizon of meaning of 'transgender' – especially as it gets mobilized by outreach AIDS work and lgbt+ associationism – nonetheless escape, or at least call into question, the epistemological premises of the category itself. The New York ballroom scene of the late 1990s, as well as several other local clubs and cruising areas in the city, where Valentine conducts his fieldwork, are, in fact, filled with subjectivities that bend and reshape the confines and meanings of both transgender and other, more or less 'queerly'-inflected, identity categories: gay, lesbian, woman, and man, first of all; but also, the more context-specific fem

⁹⁵ And, in fact, she does so not only in this episode. This deployment very much percolated all throughout our research-based relationality, albeit constantly evolving and taking on new nuances over time.

queen, butch, butch queen in drag, and more. Rather than attributing the ‘dissonances’ with transgender that he encounters on the field to people’s false consciousness or ignorance – a move which would have reinstated the epistemological primacy of transgender itself, as well as of the gender *and* sexuality system tout court –, Valentine argues, instead, that it is precisely the (at the time) newly-acquired epistemological primacy of transgender what produces these ‘other’ modalities of naming and embodying sexual/gender defiance *as* false and wrong: as mere relics of old-fashioned, somewhat passé misunderstandings of how gender itself works, and of what gender itself is. While reflecting on the stories and narratives that he encountered during his own fieldwork endeavors, Valentine (p. 132) exhaustively pins down these levels of complexity as follows:

However, these stories are useful not simply to show how identity categories such as “gay” or “transgender” cannot account for the complexity of people’s desires, understandings of self, and experience (though they do this too). Rather, they are most useful in showing that the complexity of experience can disrupt the very analytic categories by which social theorists and others attempt to describe the intersections of different forms of lived experience. That is, Anita or Jade [two of Valentine’s research participants] do not simply demonstrate the ways that gendered and sexual experiences escape the boundaries of identity categories: rather, they show how that which counts as “gender” or “sexuality” is itself the contested ground. The point of these ethnographic anecdotes and theoretical discussions of “identity,” then, is not to reveal “transgender” or “person of transsexual/ transgender experience” as empty categories. Rather, they show that the category of transgender is (as much as the category of “homosexuality”) an effect of the distinction between what “gender” and “sexuality” have come to mean in much contemporary politics, theory, and social service provision.

Similarly, here I do not want to discredit the validity and importance of ‘transgender’ or ‘gay’ – nor of any other category of identity, for that matter. Rather, I am more interested in shedding light on what these same categories materially *do*, at those junctures where the primacy of the gender *and* sexuality script that they are assumed to be dependent on happens to fall short. If both ‘transgender’ and ‘homosexual’ have historically constituted the outcomes of the division between what counts as gender and what as sexuality in the first place, then, it is exactly Atif’s mobilization of transgender and gay as something other than “an effect of the distinction between what gender and sexuality have come to mean” (ibid.) – i.e., Atif’s mobilization of transgender-as-gay – that confuses the social worker, used as she is to think: a) that gayness is something which strictly concerns the realm of *sexual orientation*, while transgender pivots around *gender identity* – hence, her further probing into Sam’s understanding of himself by relying on this exact terminology; and b) that, consequently, (male) homosexuality and transgender (womanhood) constitute two inherently incompatible modalities of being in the world. The two, however, are only incompatible as long as one assumes this specific gender-and-sexuality framework as the only valid and correct one: as the ‘reality’, to come back to Sam’s terminology, rather than a single, very much time- and space-specific, analytical

possibility among others (Valentine, 2004; 2007). Valentine (2004, p. 219) further builds on this last point as follows:

[I]t is vital to recognize that it [the distinction between gender and sexuality] is also a modern (and modernist) technology of understanding the self that developed in the West in the mid- to late twentieth century. More important, it does not explain everyone's understanding of self in all times and places. In short, in much of the discussion about "gender" and "sexuality," the categorical power of these terms has come to be read as experiential fact; or, more succinctly, the experiential is subsumed and reordered by the categories we use to make sense of experience. Where this becomes dangerous is in the reordering of experience through analytic categories seen to be transparent and natural, a reordering that can, for all its progressive impetus, reproduce the invisibility and disenfranchisement of people who have had little voice, historically, in the debates and policies that have shaped their worlds.

When it comes to contemporary South Asia – in fact, as Valentine's (2007) U.S.-based research testifies to, not exclusively when it comes to it –, the univocal validity and transparency of such an analytical and epistemological framework cannot be taken for granted too lightly, not least because the idea of sexuality itself, understood as a taillight of identity, has been repeatedly called out as unable to do justice to the actual textures that the realm of the sexual acquires throughout the region. This is not to suggest that 'sexuality' does not exist in South Asia, or that the embodied subjectivities invoked by each of the letters making up the ever-expanding *lgbtqia+* acronym do not circulate there as intelligible categories of identity – or, again, that if they do, they necessarily circulate in incommensurate ways to their counterparts in the 'West' (see e.g., Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan, 2002). It would be both dishonest and wrong to make such a statement, as uncountable people across the region today rely on such a model of identity to make sense of themselves, their inclinations, and their channels of relationalities, as well as to reclaim rights and recognition (see e.g., Dave 2012; khanna, 2016)⁹⁶. As Nayan Shah (p.123, quoted in Rao, 2020, p. 22) was powerfully stressing already in 1993, "[Queers] are present now. On that alone we demand acknowledgement and acceptance". Additionally, the increased significance of Asia's role within the global political-economic scenario makes it imperative to address the rise of queer/lgbt+ activism and organizing across the region, as well as of the related yearnings for freedom, love, and liberation that the movement advances, even while acknowledging that these and similar concepts, languages, and discourses may take on different meanings in the region (Tian et al., 2020).

However, it is equally true and relevant that thus-understood sexual and/or gender identities and categories circulate alongside articulations of the realms of the erotic and the sexual that, in the words

⁹⁶ In the case of India, for instance, it was exactly such an ontological and identitarian model of gender and sexuality that got strategically mobilized by the local queer movement, in order to obtain the recognition of the queer body as an intelligible subject of registers of governmentality – particularly the epidemiological and the legal one (khanna, 2007; 2016).

of anthropologist akshay khanna (2016, p. 12), “need not speak to the sense of self or the definition of the self at all”. In other words, there exists within the South Asian context – within specifically caste/class-inflected junctions of the immensely broad and diverse South Asian context, at least – what khanna terms a “*sexualness* that escapes the frame of sexuality, desire, and eroticism that flows through people without constituting them as subjects” (ibid., emphasis added). That is to say, without giving rise to specific sets of sexual and/or gender *identities* and *subjectivities*. While sexuality “is ascribed to the ontology of personhood—as though who or what one desires or fucks defines *what* one is” (khanna, p. 11, emphasis in the original), in South Asia desire does not necessarily constitute the foundation of ontology, it “does not necessarily inform an interiority” (p. 361), with the result that instances of homo-sex (as in: the sexual act) do not necessarily inform processes of homo-sexual subjectification (as in: self-identification as gay or bisexual, for instance). I am not advancing any innovative remarks here. As famously expounded by Michel Foucault in as early as 1976, and then further expanded, among others, by Jeffrey Weeks (1986) and Jonathan Ned Katz (1990; 1995), sexuality in and of itself, the homosexual as a specie, and the framework of heterosexuality, too, all constitute the products of an extremely specific place and time in history – i.e., 19th century Europe. As such, they thus cannot be expected to indiscriminately function everywhere, at all times, in the same ways, and both Valentine’s 90s New York and khanna’s contemporary India are cases in point.

Sticking here to South Asia, the copresence of sexuality and sexualness across the region is one that comes with its own baggage. As soon as the erotic and the sexual stop being integral parts of identity construction in the same way that sexuality is, it is, in fact, the distinction itself between homosexuality and heterosexuality that begins to lose at least part of its significance – an element, this one, that already resonates with both Atif’s and Sam’s strategies of gender/sexual meaning-making addressed so far. That between homo and heterosexuality is not, however, the only binary whose effectiveness decreases when turning one’s attention to specifically class-inflected junctures of sexual/gender defiance in the otherwise immensely vast and variegated South Asian context. Others have, in fact, argued that the framework of sexualness just outlined, while successfully challenging the homo/hetero binarism implicit in the ontological model of sexuality-as-personhood delineated above, still fails to get rid of the assumption that gender conformity has to be an unquestioned feature of sexually-variant people (especially ‘male-bodied’ people, to whom these reflections refer) – a move which ends up reiterating the naturalization of the male/female gender binary itself (Dutta and Roy, 2014). This line of reasoning would indeed miss the crucial point that people who engage in ‘same-sex’ behavior in South Asia – albeit not necessarily understanding themselves along specific lines of identity for this reason – are nonetheless often socially marked or unmarked on the basis of gender variance, rather than for their participation in homo-sex per se. To put it bluntly, as both Sam’s and

Atif's life trajectories eloquently testify to, on the basis of their effeminacy⁹⁷. It is exactly here, I argue, that one of the main keys to make sense of both Atif's and Sam's cases lies. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014, pp. 324-325) explain this critical juncture as follows:

This suggests that “same-sex” practices in South Asia are not just diffusely spread among “men” but are fundamentally constituted vis-à-vis gender normativity or variance and that gender variance, often perceived as being connected to same-sex desire, serves as a significant axis of social demarcation. Thus while sexuality may not have been a distinct axis of personhood in India prior to the emergence of the modern homosexual, the gendering of sexual behavior and the (homo)sexualization of gender variance [...] seems to have a longer legacy, which may inform both patterns of discrimination and resistant formations of community and identity.

This is what allows, for example, perfectly straight, ‘manly’ men to have sex with Atif relatively undisturbed, without them losing an inch of their heterosexuality or manhood⁹⁸, while coterminously exposing Atif, or even Sam, to increased threats of violence and social stigmatization due to the blatant effeminacy of their embodiments. It is against this background, then, that the blurring of “cis-trans or homo-trans distinctions” (p. 321) happens, and that, crucially, caste/class enters the South Asian picture as a relevant axis of community formation – perhaps, as the most relevant axis of all (see e.g., Pamment, 2010, p.31) –, rather than and/or in addition to individual spheres of sexual/gender identity. And in fact, both the realm of *khusraness*, so greatly feared by Sam, and the gendered/sexual label of *murat*, so promptly embraced by Atif, are distinctively regional and lower-class in nature: available, that is to say, only for lower-class people to more or less willingly inhabit, or be consigned to. As already anticipated above, this does not mean that ‘transgender’ does not productively circulate across the South Asian region. Rather, it implies that both the availability of the category and people's access to, and understanding of, ‘transgender’ itself get mediated by caste, class, language, and proximity to specific sectors of associationism and activism. This mediated circulation, in turn, comes with consequences. As Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014) argue in their paper “Decolonizing Transgender in India”, in recent years, a re-enforcement of those same boundaries between cis/trans and homo/trans “as putatively cross-cultural and ontologically stable rubrics” (p. 328) has been operated, within South Asia, by nothing less than the category ‘transgender’ itself. Its ascendance as a scalar trans/national rubric of identity is, in fact, facilitating the reduction of the most variegated

⁹⁷ Clearly, these reflections apply to ‘male-born’ people only. Such a richness in theorization stands as a testimony, in contrast, to the substantial lack of engagement with what happens with women, lesbian, and/or trans-men, instead. An analogous lack is involuntarily, albeit predictably, reproduced by the present research, too, since it has only managed to reach people assigned ‘men’ at birth, with the exception of one single participant – a transgender man from Pakistan. This is, in turn, also tightly related to the gender composition of migratory flows from Bangladesh and Pakistan to Italy, which have historically been among the most male-dominated ones in the country (see Ministero del Lavoro 2023a; 2023c).

⁹⁸ An occurrence extremely common not only in Pakistan, but also in the new contexts opened up to Atif by migration to Italy.

instances of gender/sexual defiance to mere local instances of ‘transgender’ (ibid.). Concomitantly and consequently, it is also facilitating the imposition of the gender *and* sexuality framework, upon which the existence itself of transgender is premised, as the most ‘real’ and ‘correct’ one (see Valentine, 2004; 2007). This is a process that Dutta and Roy (2014) denounce with specific reference to the Indian context, and to the role that the State, urban and English-speaking elites and their circles of activism, as well as the non-governmental sector, all play in it – the latter, all powerful actors when it comes to establishing what vocabularies of ‘queerness’ become available as intelligible and effective tools for survival and recognition, and to whom. A full apprehension of the state of health of the Indian queer movement, as well as of lgbt+ activism across South Asia more broadly, lies well beyond the purview of this chapter and research as a whole (for particularly critical but spot-on perspectives, see e.g., Shah, 2015; Sircar, 2017; Tellis, 2012). Here, however, I am acknowledging these dynamics for two main reasons: first of all, because they contribute to restore an idea of the complexity that gender/sexual variance can acquire in the South Asian region today, traversed as it is by idioms, politics, policies, epistemologies, hierarchies, and languages, which can neither be restored as pristinely-local expressions of an ancestral, quintessential South Asian ‘queerness’⁹⁹, nor disregarded as mere colonial and Western imports and impositions (see earlier on in this thesis, Introduction, Section III; for a thorough articulation of these tensions see Rao, 2020); and secondly, because they provide the basis from which to begin understanding what happens to and through this complexity, once a project of migration ‘West’ is completed, and people get turned into SOGI/lgbt+/queer migrants and/or refugees¹⁰⁰. Indeed, an analogous concern with the super-imposition of transgender – and of lgbt+ categories of identity more broadly, for that matter – speaks volumes also to the context of this research: to the assemblage of transnational migrations from South Asia to Italy that the present research specifically turns to. In fact, as the cases analyzed in this chapter begin to show, migration and its complex, often insidious, managing techniques make the impasse described by Dutta and Roy particularly evident¹⁰¹.

Always keeping this framework in mind, let us now turn to Atif again. Even if Atif expresses her subjectivity in language by mobilizing (also) the transgender rubric; even if she looks like she might

⁹⁹ As Adnan Hossain (2018, p. 322) powerfully reminds us, “[a] critical regionality allows us to see hijra not as the product of an autochthonous/local/Indian context but as a subject position emerging at the interstice of complex inter/intra/transregionally inflected symbolic and material flows”.

¹⁰⁰ Even more so, perhaps, when this project of mobility ends in a country like Italy, where the recently-turned-lgbt+ migrant is immediately expected to interact both with the broader machine of migrants’ *accoglienza* tout court, as well as with those networks of associationism that specifically cater to the needs of lgbt+ people on the move.

¹⁰¹ It would be enough to think about the fact that, in order to get refugee status on SOGI grounds, claimants have to abide to an implicit but pervasive imperative of homonormative intelligibility: that is to say, they have to prove that they are, for instance, gay. Failing to make themselves intelligible to adjudicating authorities’ understanding of what ‘being gay’ means, inevitably results in a rejection of refugee status.

‘actually’ ‘be’, or want to ‘become’, ‘transgender’¹⁰²; even then, the epistemological and material worlds that Atif’s ‘transgender’ encompasses cannot be reduced solely to a local expression of a broader, transnational transgender identity, to a transparent translation/transposition of the globalized ‘transgender’ label into a realm of trans-vernacularity. Rooted as it is in Atif’s material participation in hijra/she-male/murat life-worlds – both in Pakistan *and* Europe, both in Punjab and Italy (see further on, Section 2.3.1.) –, as well as constantly shaped by the materiality of life in migration, Atif’s mobilization of the label rather encapsulates an ever-moving framework: one where ‘gay’ implies ‘transgender’; where being a *larkī* (girl) thrives in a language of *śauq* (lit. ‘desire’, ‘pleasure’, ‘inclination’, even ‘hobby’), rather than one of ‘gender identity’ (fieldnotes, 12/23); and where being *ādhā* transgender and *ādhā* gay is a materially available possibility, both for embodying one’s own self, and for articulating one’s relationships with other people. These frictions become particularly evident – to an extent, they get produced as frictions in the first place – in the locales of the Italian lgbt+ association, where the people around Atif (me included) fail to apprehend the material texture of her mobilization of the gay/transgender continuum: a continuum that does not transparently match with what, instead, transgender ought to be to them/us. As a consequence of this failure, Atif is repeatedly met with attempts to make her fit into this specific ‘lgbt+’ inflected script of transgender, that she succeeds in grasping and adhering to only in part.

The episode I quoted at length in the opening section is a case in point, but it is not an isolated one. Exactly a year prior to it, I had attended another one of Atif’s meeting in the association, that time finalized to discuss a number of online accidents that saw her victim of identity-theft and blackmail¹⁰³. In that occasion, too, a similar pattern to the one explored above manifested, although perhaps in slightly less glaring terms. As soon as Atif sets out to show us some pictures from her Pakistani she-male days – her hair was long, and she was wearing a finely decorated peach-colored *śalvār kamīz* with a coordinated *dupattā* –, one of the lawyers present at the meeting begins to enquire about Atif’s feelings towards his/her gender, letting him/her know that in Italy it is possible to access gender-affirming care: from hormone replacement therapy, to surgeries, up to the amendment of identity documents. Upon probing Atif’s intentions on that front, the man keeps asking her questions such as “What are your pronouns?”, “Do you prefer feminine or masculine pronouns?”. Or again: “Do you like your name?”, “How should we call you?”, thus implicitly projecting on Atif very specific

¹⁰² I apologize for the massive use of brackets, but they are necessary.

¹⁰³ In the course of this research, I attended several of these meetings. While in the majority of the cases I was the one helping with the translation, in this specific episode, given the sensitivity of the topic at stake, a professional translator and cultural mediator, native speaker of both Urdu and Punjabi, had been called to mediate the encounter. I thus only attended the meeting as an observer, without directly intervening in the dynamics at play.

discourses of transness – implying, among other things, the idea of ‘having pronouns’ and a dead-name¹⁰⁴ – which, in that occasion, Atif does not seem to be able to grasp completely. And understandably so. Suffice it to think, for instance, that in the Urdu and Punjabi languages personal pronouns are, per se, gender-neutral. It is instead the verb and adjective terminations that take on either the masculine or feminine form. Hence, because of such a basic, almost banal reason, the by-now ubiquitous “What are your pronouns?” question comes to bear little to no sense at all to an Urdu- and Punjabi-speaking person, who has been living in Italy for less than a year and is not (yet?) fluent in such established queer/lgbt+ discourses and practices. Similarly, when it comes to her name, she only replies by saying that Atif is a beautiful name and that she likes it, an answer that gives away her lack of fluency into the specific language of trans identity that is being automatically projected onto her.

Crucially, here I am not trying to make a case for the hyper-incommensurability of Atif’s sexual/gender defiance. In fact, sexual/gender defiance remains incommensurable only as long as one stays attached to the mistakenly taken-for-granted universality of a very precise script of queerness: one that rests on the existence of gender *and* sexuality as two separate and independent spheres. To paraphrase once again David Valentine (2007, p. 123), in the case of both this meeting and the one discussed at the beginning of this section, the perceived dissonances and incoherences in Atif’s strategies of self-naming and self-understanding – rather than being inherent to Atif herself as symptoms of her false consciousness, confusion, or unresolvable ‘alterity’ – get instead produced as dissonances in the first place by the questions that are being posed to her, in an attempt to probe into those exact same strategies. More specifically, by the social worker and lawyer’s choice of language in formulating their enquiries – choices reflecting their own understandings of what queerness is and how it works; but also, by my own inability to mediate between these two different, albeit at times partially overlapping epistemologies of gender/sexual defiance, if not of gender *and* sexuality and gender/sexuality tout court.

Similarly, here, neither do I want to crystallize Atif’s as an inherently more authentically South Asian modality of inhabiting ‘queerness’ than, for instance, Sam’s. If anything, all the discourses and strategies discussed in these pages need to be apprehended as taking shape and developing transnationally, always in and through migration to Italy – and not least because it is exclusively in and through migration to Italy that I got to know, and interact with, Atif and Sam both. Atif’s own belonging to she-male/murat networks of relationality, for instance – in a way, the most blatantly South Asian accent (Khubchandani, 2020; see Section 2.3.) of Atif’s ‘queerness’ – remained quite opaque

¹⁰⁴ The term ‘deadnaming’ originated among trans communities and serves to indicate the “calling [of] a trans person by their birth name after they have adopted a new name”. Happening either by accident or choice, it is nonetheless widely perceived as a violent speech act, one that strips the deadnamed person of dignity and often puts them at risk of further danger by way outing them as trans. For a broader discussion of naming among trans youth, see Sinclair-Palm (2017).

to me all throughout research (see Kasmani, 2021; see also Hossain, Pamment and Roy, 2023 on the internal, regionally-inflected complexities of ‘third gender’ realms in South Asia). Suffice it to think, on this regard, that her explicit, vocally expressed identification with the label ‘murat’ only took place in November 2025, well beyond the ‘official’ completion of fieldwork, thus only allowing me to make sense of several crucial junctures of her story retroactively. This has happened because of Atif’s own will and ability in eluding me (see, e.g., Khan, 2014a on khwaja sara’s ‘games’ of obfuscation, deception, and self-preservation); because I could only look at this peculiar realm of gender/sexual defiance from ‘afar’; but also, because it ended up getting entangled and confused with the changes – in languages, in community-making strategies, in available epistemologies – that migration inevitably brought along for Atif. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, rather than congealing as the most quintessentially South Asian sign of Atif’s sexual/gender defiance, what her involvement with ‘hijra’/‘murat’ groups ultimately did end up disclosing was, instead, the non-hyper-locality of Atif’s hijrascape itself (see Hossain 2018; Hossain, Pamment and Roy, 2023). As the next section of the present work will further explore, especially through a social media platform like TikTok, in the aftermath of her arrival in Italy, Atif soon becomes part of a much broader, interconnected European network of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ‘transgender’/‘she-male’/‘hijra’-identified individuals, located all across Europe. A network that I could not directly access, but that, by its mere existence, nonetheless came to demystify the aura of hyper-locality and immobility that instead surrounds the vast majority of popular and academic understandings of hijraness itself (see Hossain, 2018; Hossain and Nanda, 2020; Hossain, Pamment and Roy, 2023)¹⁰⁵.

The aim of the discussion carried out across this section – a discussion which was supposed to be a mere parenthesis, but ended up getting entangled in quite a few detours, instead – was to contribute to make sense of Sam’s and Atif’s cases not only individually, but also in conversation with each other. More specifically, of Sam’s formulation of the Pakistani gay man’s discursive impossibility as profoundly, albeit indirectly, in conversation with Atif’s enthusiastic alleged ‘conflation’ of gay with transgender. Theirs are two independent, yet at the same time communicating cases, which, on the one hand, result each *from* complex entanglements of class positionality, greater or minor availability of, and proximity to, globalized languages of ‘queerness’, as well as individual experiences of one own’s body and desires. But which, on the other hand, also result *into* two profoundly different, if not entirely opposite, strategies for engaging with this complexity in and of itself: of refusal, disavowal,

¹⁰⁵ As far as I am aware, at the time of writing, the only form of hijra mobility documented in literature concerns intra-South Asian movement, that is, movement by hijras traveling across the Indo-Pakistani or the Indo-Bangladeshi border. There is no evidence, instead, of hijras migrating transnationally. And yet, as I gradually, albeit always partially, got to understand throughout the conduction of this research, Atif established meaningful networks with several other hijras all across Europe, both from Pakistan and Bangladesh: they organized parties, interacted through social media platforms like TikTok, and referred to one another as *gurus* and *chelas*. See next section of this thesis.

and reformulation through the language of wrongness, in the case of Sam; of embracing and confident enunciation upon interpellation, in the case of Atif. In other words, coming back to where this whole discussion started, Atif's embodiments and languages of sexual/gender defiance encapsulate quite perfectly that same 'wrongness' that Sam decides to (momentarily) reject, thus proving the limited reach of such a heuristic of wrongness in the first place.

And yet, it is a 'wrongness' that nonetheless keeps on looming large, as such, also on Atif herself. It does so in particularly vicious manners in migration, whereby Atif comes to occupy a position that defies not only the expectations of heterosexuality, but also those of lgbt-ness, and of gender *and* sexuality tout court¹⁰⁶. This defiance comes with material implications, that the two anecdotes analyzed above begin to uncover, but cannot possibly exhaust. Atif's difficulty in cracking the codes to access gender-affirming care; her later decision to abruptly exit the reception system and (momentarily) disappear, not only from the association's radar, but also from my own (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.2.); her attempts at hyper-victimization as a tool to navigate Italian migration bureaucracy and its reception system, and thus obtain what she wants/needs: these are only some of the instances where Atif's status as a rendered-unintelligible, hyper-otherized subject emerges, influencing her trajectory of life in migration in profound ways (see Section 2.3. for a more thorough discussion of these issues in relation to Atif's story). As a matter of fact, they are also quite different from the recognition that Sam receives, although temporarily, through the embracing of a much more intelligible iteration of gayness: one that the miniscule, somewhat amusing, and apparently insignificant pinky finger anecdote analyzed earlier points to and evokes.

2.2.3. Coming Out, but Doing It Backwards: Circular Resignifications of Sexual Defiance in Migration

Fast forward to February 2025. Somehow, almost a year has passed since Sam and I last met in person during the previous spring, and many things have changed in his life since. Luckily, we did manage to at least keep in touch via message, and I am thus privy to some of the biggest of these changes – although, as I would soon come to find out, not to all of them. For one thing, after debating it for months, Sam has eventually decided to exit the SAI project where he was living, and moved to a new town – another rather anonymous, small urban center in Northern Italy, located in a different region. There, he rents a shared room in a house with other Pakistani men and works odd hours as a forklift driver. His endurance to working almost non-stop, together with the low rent that the house owner demands from him and the other tenants allow him to save a decent amount of money each

¹⁰⁶ Incidentally, both of them are, in turn, rather uniformly widespread throughout discourses circulating across Italian mainstream lgbt+ associations and migrants' support networks.

month relatively easily. He is studying to get his driving license and he is even contemplating buying a small property in a rather secluded village up the mountain side, not too far from his current hometown. Interestingly enough, Sam's move out of the reception system and into 'autonomy'¹⁰⁷, although representing the natural, expected outcome of his 'integration'¹⁰⁸ journey – *accoglienza* is limited in time for everyone, after all – is at the same time one heavily dependent on the deepfelt need to get away from a failed relationship, whose complicated and ambiguous dynamics, and, later on, equally complicated aftermaths, were causing him quite a few problems already the first time I met him, almost two years prior (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.). Over the previous months, Sam repeatedly expressed to me a sense of satisfaction with his decision to move away, both from this man and from his old town, and I am thus impatient to see him and talk to him in person again.

On the day of the meeting, by mid-morning, Sam and I find each other in the historic center of the nearest big city to Sam's otherwise rather isolated hometown. After the usual initial greetings, we decide to go sit inside a nearby café to have our much longed for catching-up session – for sure, much longed for by me. Once we have our sitting spot and caffeinated beverages arranged, Sam immediately gets hold of the conversation by asking me how my research is going and if I have managed to meet someone new. I have just finished providing my vague answer, when he quite bluntly comes up with what, at first, sounds to me like a pretty straightforward declaration: “I have decided that I want to come out!” he tells me, smiling affably. I do not have the time to make explicit to him the direction that my response is about to take – I can already hear myself uttering some very cliché reaction: a “Yas! Slay!”, followed by a “You got this! You have my full support!” – that Sam somewhat mischievously adds: “I am *straight*”.

Now, to say that the closing bit of this declaration does not take me by surprise would be an outright lie. No matter how prone towards questioning the universality of mainstream LGBT-based frameworks of identity and narratives of self-discovery I had been professing myself to be throughout the conduction of this research, evidently, I was still somehow assuming them as my reference point – if not as the primary one, at least as the one most immediately available for me to cling to. I realize that my face is betraying my puzzlement because Sam immediately sets out to provide a rather detailed explanation of the rationale behind this unexpected declaration of his. It is an explanation that, from that

¹⁰⁷ This is a language commonly used among social workers within Italy's machine for migrants' reception, which I do not necessarily agree with, nor want to uncritically reproduce here. I use quotation marks to signal my distancing from these vocabularies and the policies that they both convey and are nurtured by.

¹⁰⁸ Similarly to 'autonomy', 'integration', too, belongs to the language of Italy's reception system and migration management machine more broadly, which I neither endorse, nor deem accurate and/or just. Here, too, I thus recur to quotation marks as a strategy to distance myself from such a vocabulary, which, however, nonetheless contributes to shape migrants' lives and experiences in Italy in profound ways. For a critical perspective on the concept of integration for migrants and refugees against the backdrop of the Italian context, see Catarci, 2014. See also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

moment onwards, gradually leads me to revisit his trajectory of ‘queerness’ and/in migration in a new, much more nuanced light. Earlier on in the discussion, while reconstructing Sam’s disavowal of the Pakistani ‘gender system’ and his consequent resignification of himself through an identitarian script of gayness during the initial stages of his migratory journey, I did make it a point to hint as frequently as possible at the temporariness of such an epistemological operation. I did not, however, provide any other glimpses into the specificity of this temporariness itself. By turning to Sam’s decision to come out as straight – to the forces lying behind this move and the implications coming along with it –, I will now attempt to make up for such previous vagueness.

As it soon emerges from Sam’s words – and perhaps unsurprisingly so, in light of the discussion carried out in the previous section –, the problematic cluster motivating his coming out, *but backwards*, does not lie at all in a variation in the way he experiences same-sex feelings and desires, and subsequently acts on them. Throughout our conversation, perhaps also compelled to do so by my ill-concealed puzzled reaction, Sam makes sure to clarify that what he feels as stemming from inside himself has not changed: he keeps on desiring men, on nurturing feelings for them, and on engaging in sexual relationships/encounters with them, whenever he gets the chance to. That is, Sam’s discursive circling back into straightness does not result from a further, internal awakening of his; it does not constitute the uttering of the late realization that he had somehow gotten himself wrong and had, instead, been heteronormative all along. It is not, in other words, the expression of the sort of awakening that coming out is usually expected to represent the tail end of – albeit, this time, turned ‘backwards’, facing nothing other than straightness itself. Rather, his vocal move is yet another symptom of the much more profound meaning-giving and meaning-making journey that Sam seems to be constantly busy grappling with, both before and after moving out of Pakistan, and that I have been attempting to unpack from the very beginning of this chapter. It is a journey that Sam embarks on sometime and some-where far away from this apparently anticlimactic final utterance of his, and that, after testing out several possible routes, he decides to stop, perhaps to pause¹⁰⁹, somewhere else – as the rest of the discussion will now show, somewhere both different and, at the same time, incredibly similar to the point of departure itself.

Instead of sex, desire, and/or sexuality per se, two others are the key discursive axes through which Sam’s justification for his backward-facing coming out as straight takes shape during our

¹⁰⁹ At the time of writing, it is impossible to establish if this discursive circling back into straightness constitutes a definitive stop, or yet another a momentary pause that will later evolve into something else.

conversation: respectability and usefulness. Or, it would perhaps be better to say, through their opposites: non-respectability and uselessness. With a somewhat predictable move¹¹⁰, Sam begins explaining the rationale behind his new coming out by conceptualizing gay identities and embodiments, as well as lgbt+ milieus and discourses more broadly, as going against what, to him, counts as being respectable. The ostentation, flaunting, and overall excess, that he perceives as inherent to those realms of existence and sociality, render them to him unpalatable, if not entirely distasteful modalities of being in the world¹¹¹. As he explains to me, he has thought about this point extensively: he has spoken about it with other people – including the social worker-turned-friend who starred in the previous pinky-centered ethnographic vignette –, has read the Quran, and has eventually reached the conclusion that he does not need, nor wants to, associate himself anymore to the label ‘gay’, and to ‘lgbt+’ realms more broadly. He is, in other words, apparently turning away from the antinormative texture of queerness (see Luther, 2023) – from the politically-queer component of queerness itself – to retreat into a semblance of alleged ‘normalcy’. And yet, there is much more to Sam’s statement than this. Contextually to this first half of the argument, in fact, the lgbt+ world as a whole, as well as the entire system of labels that it entails and rests upon, get conceived by Sam also as the producers of divisions that are, according to him, fundamentally *useless*. The rationale behind this belief is two-fold. Not only are we, as human beings, all equal, and therefore not truly in need of marking ourselves as different from one another – if anything, Sam explains, it is rather equality, understood as ‘being all the same’, that we should strive for, not its (alleged) opposite¹¹². But also – Sam adds, and to me way more surprisingly – in Italy there is really no need to mobilize these categories of identity because – and I’m paraphrasing his words as faithfully as possible here¹¹³ – nobody will do anything to you if you say that you are gay: nobody will harass you, deny you housing, or refuse to employ you, for instance. The law and the state are there to protect you, no one can hurt you because you are gay, there is no discrimination. In other words, Sam perceives and reconstructs Italy as a place where there

¹¹⁰ This constitutes a discursive strategy that many other participants, too, tapped into, albeit always in nuanced and personalized manners. See further on in this thesis the cases of Shanto (Chapter Four, Section 4.3), and Muneeb (Chapter Four, Section 4.4.).

¹¹¹ When exposing this new perspective to me, he almost immediately brings up pride marches as the main example to substantiate his claims. He reminds me that during the summer of 2023 – while he was still going through the asylum procedure and was thus collaborating rather closely with his hometown’s lgbt+ association – he did attend the local pride parade, a small yet heartfelt event, particularly impactful for the provincial reality where it took place. He even got up on stage and spoke in front of everyone: he was hesitant at first, but once he took the microphone and started to speak, he could not be stopped anymore. He even showed me some photos of the event, don’t I remember? He makes sure to ask me. Now, instead, he is taking his distances from both that episode per se, and his own partaking in it, stressing the unnecessary flaunting and overall excesses – the bizarre clothes or absence of clothes tout court, the music, the speeches – that marked that space.

¹¹² As I anticipated in a previous footnote, this latter argument is not exclusive to Sam’s perspective, but rather constitutes a recurring thread in this research. See, e.g., Shanto’s case in section 4.3., or Muneeb’s in 4.4.

¹¹³ The conversation was not recorded, I took notes of it in as much detail as I could on my field diary, as soon as the meeting was over

is no need for the label ‘gay’ anymore, because there is no need to claim any rights anymore. If rights for lgbt+ people already exist – that’s what Sam’s words hint at, here –, then why would one want to keep employing the label in the first place? A label which, on top of it all, is enmeshed in meanings and representations that Sam himself re-thematizes as excessive, unrespectable, disturbing, even.

Albeit not exactly overlapping, then, the two realms of respectability and usefulness are not entirely detached from one another either. It is, however, the discourse of uselessness that I want to foreground here. Throughout our conversation, Sam’s perception of homosexuality as a non-source of potential discrimination gets constructed as standing more or less implicitly in contrast with the amount of quotidian, material problems that, instead, inform the lived realities of many of Italy’s migrants: vast numbers of people who, upon arriving and settling down in the country, find themselves jostling against restrictive laws, often-hostile environments, an incredibly complex bureaucracy, different sets of constant and pervasive discrimination, and a new language that they struggle to understand and learn. Getting a house, finding work, managing one’s own documents are, in fact, only some of the problematic clusters that migrant lives have to pivot around in Italy – including, obviously, Sam’s. In Sam’s reconstruction, then, homosexuality and potential homophobia quite simply pale in comparison to the material hardships that life in Italy gets filled with, the moment one becomes socially and/or legally identified as a racialized other, a foreigner, *and* a migrant – it does not seem to matter that much whether an ‘economic’ or a ‘sexual’ one¹¹⁴ – upon arriving and settling down in the country.

Now, Sam’s characterization of today’s Italy as a place where homosexuality/queerness has stopped being problematic, to the point that it no longer even entails discrimination anymore, might understandably raise more than a few eyebrows, if not be entirely contested as a sheer misreading of reality – of what being queer in Italy today actually entails (for recent data on homophobia in Italy, see e.g., Callahan and Loscocco, 2021; Rossi, 2025). However, I want to argue, it is exactly through its semblance of out-of-touch-ness that such a stance manages to reveal the existence of deep, structural dynamics, which, although intersecting with sexuality, also very much exceed it. On top of being constantly informed by discourses of respectability and equality-as-sameness, which would, no doubt, leave Sam open to charges of homonormativity and un-queerness by numerous, more or less hardcore, queer theory scholars and enthusiasts alike (for a critique of queer anthropology’s striving for anti-normativity, see Lewin, 2016; see also later on in the thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.), Sam’s formulation of the ‘uselessness’ of the entire lgbt apparatus – of its identities, discourses, rights, and aesthetics – is one also deeply embedded in the materiality of racialization, class precarity (in his

¹¹⁴ For a more thorough explanation to the critical approach to migration category that I take up and expound throughout both research conduction, see later on in this work Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

case, of outright class downfall), and migratory status, which concretely inform the lives of many of those people who, more or less willingly, end up living and working within Italy's borders. As already anticipated above, among the implications of declaring that no one will refuse to rent you a house if you are gay is, in fact, that someone most likely will if you are, for instance, Pakistani; if you don't have the right documents or the right kind of job; or if you don't speak the language properly¹¹⁵. The material urgency and pervasiveness of this set of issues thus feed into Sam's construction of the 'uselessness' of (white) (Italian) gayness and lgbt-ness tout court, to the point of pushing them entirely into the background, rendered so opaque in the process that their actual complexity and far-from-resolved nature can barely be discerned anymore.

Something apparently paradoxical is thus at play here. First of all, contrary to what an intersectional reading and understanding of this scenario would have called for (see e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Taylor, Hines and Casey, 2010), Sam's determination of the class- and race-infused struggles that make up the materiality of migrants' lives in Italy does not contribute at all to scratch Italy's ambiguously utopian aura as a discrimination-free zone for 'queers', which Sam repeatedly invokes. If anything, it becomes the discursive ground against which such an aura gets constructed in the first place. In turn, Sam's mis/reading of Italy as an lgbt+ safe heaven – something which would count as naïve romanticization to some, and as sheer falsity to most – does not at all bring him closer to queer-ness, as one might have expected if following the predictable and simplistic logic: "Given that Italy is a safe place for queers, I can at least be/come as queer as I want". Rather, he harnesses this narrative precisely as the tool to distance himself from the lgbt+ acronym, along with everything that those letters carry, both on an identitarian and a social level. It is, in fact, exactly at this juncture that class, race, and migratory status – which initially all seemed to have been severed off queer sexuality in Sam's 'utopian' view of Italy – resurface as queer sexuality's actual core, though always inextricably enmeshed with, and cloaked by, layered discourses of normativity and respectability. Surely enough, at this point, filing Sam with charges of homonormativity for his more or less explicit mobilization of a rhetoric of decorum and respectability, and with charges of false consciousness and self-repression for his dismissal of a homosexuality that he, more or less reluctantly, nonetheless keeps on tapping into (see e.g., Decena 2008), would provide a quick and effective way out of this entire conundrum. Avoiding in such a blatant way to engage with the depth of Sam's newfound straightness, however, would obscure precisely what his coming out encapsulates and exposes: the fact that, upon closer analysis, the fabric of sexuality/queerness in migration turns out to be made, instead, of *everything but* sexuality/queerness in the first place (khanna, 2016).

¹¹⁵ The life and migration trajectory of Muneeb, another key participant in this research, are a case in point. For a more thorough discussion of his case, see further on in this thesis, Chapter Four, Section 4.4.

The hypothesis that sexuality is never only sexuality, but rather *everything but* sexuality – by extension, that gay is never only gay, but rather *everything but* gay (p. 371) – gets first theorized in these terms by anthropologist akshay khanna (2016), at the very end of their work *Sexualness*¹¹⁶. According to khanna, sexuality – rather than being one among the several axes that intersectional analysis should be able to account for – constitutes, in and of itself, a *function* of other dimensions of the social: of nation, race, class, language, religion, respectability, and more. It is, in fact, by way of being subsumed under the banner of sexuality itself, that these dimensions get to entirely disappear from view. This, in turn, produces the illusion that the ‘thing’ – the person, the place, the practice – labeled ‘gay’ (or queer; or sexuality, even) has been resolved, in and of itself, precisely by way of this naming strategy, rather than appearing as the main problematic cluster which would deserve to be further unpacked in the first place (for a more in-depth analysis of this idea, see further on in this thesis, Chapter Four: 4.2.2.). In the case of Sam, it is exactly his dissatisfaction with gayness – expressed as a newfound self-proclamation of straightness through the loaded language of ‘coming out’ – that opens up a window into the fact that naming something ‘gay’ actively works to hide how that same something is, rather, everything but gay: it is class, it is race, it is religion, it is nation, it is language, it is history, it is geopolitics – it is also, as next section will further explore, aesthetics, style, and taste (Khubchandani, 2020; see further on in this thesis, Chapter 2.3.). If, to borrow directly from akshay khanna’s (2016, p. 371) words, “Gay, rather than being a function of sexuality, is instead the function of race, gender, nation, religion and class”, Sam’s decision to step away from it comes as no surprise. It is, in fact, from this core of things-that-gayness-are-not – rather than from gayness itself, which, strictly speaking, does not ‘exist’ as such anymore – that Sam is distancing himself, by coming out as straight. Or, in Muñoz’s (1999) words, that he is *disidentifying* from. Made up as it is of Sam’s choice to leave behind gayness/queerness and circle back (again) into straightness, this project of disidentification proves profoundly different from the ones that Muñoz (1999) famously theorizes and envisions in his eponymous work¹¹⁷. One where disidentification does not really look politically queer, antinormative, and subversive in its texture, but rather seems to retrieve into something which, at least on the surface, is quintessentially normative: respectable heterosexuality – a façade of respectable

¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding its brilliance and versatility, the concept has however remained quite a neglected perspective elsewhere in queer studies, and all the more so across queer migration scholarship. I will more thoroughly attempt to incorporate it into the theoretical framework of this work later on, in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁷ In his famous, eponymously titled work, Muñoz (1999, p. 4) introduces disidentification as follows: “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship”. Shortly after, he also adds that “disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere” (ibid.). Here, however, I believe that Sam’s case fits neither of these two possibilities spelled out by the theorist.

heterosexuality, at least, behind which to continue to try and unleash one's own sexual and/or romantic fantasies and needs.

When viewed from this composite diachronic and diatopic angle, then, the core of Sam's positioning towards gayness/queerness does not appear to have fundamentally shifted, before, during, or after migration. If anything, notwithstanding all of its tortuous, peripatetic movements, it seems to have followed a circular trajectory, whereby the terms of the negotiation partly changed, but its modalities and rationales remained consistent. A similar, albeit differently-configured threat to respectability, akin to what Sam used to experience in Pakistan in relation to *khusraness*, appears in fact to have crossed national borders and have attached to 'gay', instead – understood both as an identity and a lifestyle. As retraced in this section, during the initial phases of his asylum journey, 'gay' temporarily – although never fully comfortably – functions for Sam as the tool through which he can attempt to get out of the discursive impossibility of the Pakistani homosexual man that used to haunt him back home, and thus ultimately restore himself as an interpellatable subject – as a subject tout court, in fact. At this juncture, 'gay' works precisely because in the new geographical and social dimensions that Sam finds himself traversing, '*khusra*' is not present; '*khusra*' is not, in other words, a discursive or embodied possibility, dangerously available for him to occupy/fall into, via the effeminacy of his bodily gestures. And yet, in the process, 'gay' ends up doing way more than just granting Sam his allotted space into subjecthood: exactly like '*hijra*'/'*khusra*' was never solely and transparently about gender ambiguous people living with other gender ambiguous people – it entailed a thick entanglement of gender/sexuality, class, and respectability discourses, additionally laced with a good amount of repugnance, mis/understood opacity, and risky proximity –, 'gay', too, turns out to be never solely and transparently about men who are mentally and physically attracted to other men. Italy's version of 'gay', for sure, isn't¹¹⁸. As khanna's (2016, pp. 369-374) "everything but hypothesis" already helped us anticipating, 'gay' comes, instead, with a whole baggage attached: a baggage that implies, among other things, the tacit but pervasive expectation that Sam will participate in shared, subcultural codes of LGBT-based identity, visibility, aesthetics, and sociality – epitomized, for instance, by the act of joining a Pride parade, and by the vocal performance of coming out itself (see Decena, 2008; 2011; Horton, 2018a). These are codes, however, that Sam is not really fluent in, nor necessarily comfortable in traversing¹¹⁹. In other words, as Sam soon realizes, the one hidden behind the label 'gay' is a baggage that will not allow him to make sense of himself in his own terms on the long run: not through

¹¹⁸ See also Sedgwick's formulation of identification as something that does not necessarily entails mimesis, but can rather also manifests as "identification as against" (Sedgwick, 1990, quoted in Muñoz, 1999, p. 8).

¹¹⁹ This is how Sam himself was speaking about the matter already at the beginning of our research relationality, in July 2023: "Now I can use this word for me that 'I'm a gay', but the problem is: still there is something, like confusion. Not the confusion, but something wrong. I cannot explain how to say this right now, but... Sometimes I feel it's because it's my first education when I was a kid. So how can I change myself quickly? It will take some time to, you know...".

his heartfelt attachment to Islam, which he does not want to give up on; not through his double-edged role of man who enjoys sex and intimacy with other men and thus leaves Pakistan to explore his desires more freely, on the one hand, and of the good husband and father who moves abroad to better provide for his family, on the other; nor, finally, out of and beyond the trauma – which he has been carrying within himself since childhood – of being read as ‘non-man’ through the derogatory lens of khusraness. In this regard, towards the end of our morning conversation at the café, not long after his brand new backwards-facing coming out, it is Sam himself who brings to the table the possibility that his newfound straightness might constitute the residual symptom of his calcified trauma, more than anything else. That is to say, of that same trauma caused to him by years spent fighting the constant, external attachment of khusraness upon his barely domesticated effeminate body: the body of a young boy first, and of a grown-up man later, who has been constantly aspiring to live a fulfilled middle-class, piously Muslim, respectable life, while also being prevented from doing so by his risky proximity to non-maleness and khusraness – in other words, by his own body and desires.

And yet, this is still not the end of the story. At this point, in fact, yet another discursive strategy emerges from Sam, as the ultimate means for him to make sense of this further turn of dis/identification taken by his life during this more advanced stage of Italian intra-national mobility: a strategy that, not unlike his coming out, manages once again to leave me confused, amused, and intrigued, all at the same time. Sam and I are walking aimlessly around town, chatting and trying to battle the winter cold, when he voices his ultimate effort at gender/sexual meaning-making: torn between what feels to me like a mix of admiration and self-identification – tinted also by a subtle, yet decisive hint of irony – Sam solemnly declares: you know, those men who are married to women – those men who, in more academically-sanctioned terms, are perfectly inserted within a framework of respectable and normative heterosexuality – but still have sex with other men on the side... they are *the real heroes!* (fieldnotes, 02/25). It is, perhaps, in this latter sentence that the missing piece of the puzzle can be found. Against the extremely composite background that his life and mobility trajectories compose, straightness – Sam’s own figuration of straightness, at least – becomes the one discursive avenue left for him to try and resolve, though not without considerable effort, the striding conflicts between identity and behavior, desire and respectability, class and religion, migration and family, that all the other discursive possibilities he had previously encountered and tested out only further complicated. As it appears from the language of heroism that Sam chooses, it is a resolution that requires a certain amount of strength – of masculine-coded strength, in a way – but that eventually rewards the subject with a more or less imaginative figuration of the amount of success that he has been coveting for all of his life. As evidenced by his coming out as straight, Sam, too, has become one of the “real heroes” that he declares to so much admire. Better yet, he is trying hard to become one, albeit remaining

perfectly aware of the paradoxical irony – the cheekiness, even – that such an endeavor entails. After all, as Anjali Arondekar (2023b, p. 253) reminds us when writing about the idea of a ‘queer Pakistan’, understood as a composite, ever-challenging and ever-challenged assemblage, “the thing that does not exist [...] unfolds in playfully serious fictions”. At this point, I believe, no other image could encapsulate Sam’s peripatetic trajectory in and out of ‘queerness’ – in and out of discursive impossibility, in and out of gayness, in and out of the threat of khusraness – better than this one. Having been denied a comfortable space within homosexuality and effeminacy – having denied this space to himself, too –, Sam is now ready to act as the *real hero* in the playfully serious fiction that his own ‘queerness’ is ought to represent for him.

2.3. Atif. Hijra-Clapping in a Pigneto Queer Bar: Staging Gender Defiance with an Accent

In the previous section, I attempted to harness the potential inherent in the micro-movement of a miniscule part of the human body – the smallest of our fingers – as the pretext to develop a broader analysis of some of the epistemological-cum-spatial moves informing participants’ strategies of dis/identification with different modalities and languages of sexual/gender defiance in migration, as well as the apprehensions – at times, misapprehensions – of such strategies by other external actors in participants’ lives (family members, social workers, migration companions, the ethnographer herself). It was a discussion that the raised pinky opened up, but where the small digit ultimately stopped playing the leading role, superseded as it was by additional layers of narrative and meaning, way bigger than the palm of a hand. It is by virtue of this capacity of the body – of the meanings that get attached to bodily parts and movements – to pave the way to wider considerations of participants’ experiences of ‘queerness’ and/in migration, but also in view of the body’s centrality in materially determining the unfolding of such experiences in the first place, that here in this section I aim at replicating an analogous modality of analysis, while also slightly enlarging the initial scale of the investigation: from the miniscule gesture of a finger, to (supposedly) more audible and visible kinds of bodily movements. To do so, I will turn my attention to two new sets of mobilities as enacted, this time, by Atif: the smaller physical and sonic gesture of clapping, and a more composite set of movements that coalesce into dance. Albeit both still small and confined within the individual, if always relational, realm of the body, I argue that a close apprehension of these two mobile acts can nonetheless contribute to shed light on additional, complementary questions of ‘queerness’ and/in migration to those examined in the previous section. More specifically, on some of the often-contested relationalities between ‘queer’ migrants’ moving bodies and space – be it explicitly queer-coded space or not –, as well as on issues of migrants’ fruition of, access to, and availability of space, or lack thereof, to begin with. This will in turn allow me to bridge the analysis of *movements in the body* carried on

throughout this chapter, to the apprehension of *the moving body* in space, which will instead constitute the main object of investigation of next chapter.

In continuity with the previous section, I want to start the discussion once again by a hand movement – this time, a movement which involves both hands in their entirety: i.e., clapping –, and I want to do so by asking a very specific question, inspired, in turn, by a very specific fieldwork episode: what happens when, inside the locales of a cool queer bar located in one of Rome’s LGBT-friendly neighborhoods par excellence, Pigneto (see e.g., de Michele, 2021; Popolla, 2021), in response to a waacking show taking place during Pride month celebrations, the hijra clap is performed instead, as well as in the midst of, ‘regular’ applause? In order to come up with a satisfactory answer – but also to eventually move beyond the extreme specificity of the question itself – it is once again to the field, and to a detailed description of such an out-of-place clap, that I now turn.

A Clapping Performance and a Dance Non-Performance #1

It’s a hot summer evening in Rome, and Atif and I have been invited to attend an event organized on the occasion of Pride Month by The Rainbow Hub¹²⁰. The event is supposed to consist of two different moments: a reading of selected narrativized testimonies by people who have turned to the association for support, and a waacking performance. The whole gig is taking place in Pigneto, one of Rome’s most beloved and well-known queer-friendly neighborhoods, in a small but cozy queer bar. After lingering in the outdoor area for a while, Atif and I move inside the bar to attend the reading. The venue is packed, and while Atif manages to find a seat at one of the tables I have to keep standing, leaning against the nearby wall. The event begins and the director of the association speaks first. It’s the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and she passionately reminds the audience of the relevance of the occasion for the LGBT+ community. She then goes on to read an excerpt from the Italian translation of *Transgender History* by Susan Stryker (*Storia Transgender*, 2023), where the iconic episode is discussed in detail. I lean towards Atif to ask her if she is managing to understand something: she tells me that she can only get that they are talking about transgender people and the police, but not much more than that. The setting of the space and the overall situation do not allow me to properly translate the contents of the meeting and reading to him, and I cannot help but notice that she is distracted, bored, and restless most of the time.

Once this introductory section is concluded, the reading proper begins. The stories – anonymized and narrativized accounts of the actual experiences of people who reached out to the association’s

¹²⁰ The Rainbow Hub is the LGBT+ association that supported Atif while she was navigating her asylum application procedure, as well as in the aftermath of its positive outcome. Incidentally, it is the same association that put Atif and me in touch for the first time at the beginning of 2023, and that I have been cooperating with ever since, both for Atif’s case and for a couple more other Urdu-speaking people who had reached out to them for advice or support (mostly Pakistani young men applying for asylum). The name of the association has been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

helpline – are read in Italian by a small mixed group, made up of both organization’s volunteers and people who had turned to the group for support in the past, including migrants and refugees. During the reading I try to check on Atif, and she invariably looks bored or spaced out, always trying to find a new excuse to get away from the room. First, she goes to the bar counter to get a Spritz. Then, once she is done with the drink, she goes outside to smoke and remains there way longer than the time necessary to finish a cigarette would require. In the meanwhile, I take her seat and when she comes back in, she sits on a step near the bar counter, quite far from me. Throughout the remaining portion of the reading, she periodically throws annoyed and mocking looks at me from afar, which I interpret as theatrical displays both of her boredom, as well as of a certain judgement that she seems to nurture towards the people who are performing the reading.

This whole scenario, however, changes sensibly once the reading ends and we are encouraged to move to the back of the club, in the small theatre designated to host the second part of the evening: a waacking show performed by an Italy-based group of young but talented dancers. As soon as we enter this new space, Atif gets visibly excited and picks for us two chairs located in the very first row of seats. When I try to complain that we are way too close to the stage – we literally have to bend our necks backwards to see – she explains that that’s what she would always do when she would go attend dance shows back in Pakistan: sit right beneath the stage. In front of this reminiscence, I have no other choice but to cave in. We take our seats and the performance begins. This time, too, Atif’s fruition of the event proves to be tinged by a certain level of ambivalence. I can tell that she struggles to grasp exactly what is going on, both because of language barriers – the music is followed by spoken bits in Italian –, and because of a means – that of waacking – that she is not at all familiar with. At the same time, however, she is also powerfully and emotionally drawn to the group’s lead dancer, a young Italian transgender woman, around whose story and journey towards gender affirmation the whole performance revolves. All throughout the show, Atif throws some joyful looks of appreciation and understanding at me and, when it’s time to clap, she alternates a ‘classic’ applause with a different way of clapping, enacted by stiffing and expanding her palms and then vigorously bringing them together with the fingers well-spread out – a disposition which produces a much duller and stronger sound than a regular applause would. I am probably the only one in the room to notice that, but the gesture that Atif is performing coincides with what is commonly recognized across the South Asian region as the signature hijra clap (Roy, 2015), an easily recognizable sonic accompaniment to the mundanity of life in South Asian metropolises, resonating at traffic lights, on trains, around markets, and more. She reiterates again this peculiar clap with increased emphasis once the show is over, but again – and perhaps unsurprisingly – no one there except for me is able to notice. At that point, carried out by what I perceive to be the joy of having witnessed another transgender person dancing freely

on a stage in front of such an enthusiastic audience, Atif declares that she, too, wants to dance. She is not joking when she tells me that. In that exact moment, right there, she wants to get up on stage, put on her favorite Pakistani music, and dance in front of everybody. Even though I anticipate what the outcome of such a request will be, when she insists, I encourage her to go ask the organizers, who predictably deny her permission to get on stage, and rather postpone her desire to an unspecified time in the future. Sure, they can organize something together someday, they explain, but today's event is over. If Atif is interested, she can always join the waacking group and start training with them, they add. When I translate to Atif this final proposal advanced by the organizers, she quickly dismisses it, showing no intention whatsoever of starting practicing waacking, neither now, nor in a vague, unspecified time and place in the future. Instead, what she wants to do in that exact moment, on that stage, in that trendy Pigneto queer bar, is to reproduce and reenact a simple yet meaningful situation that she was familiarly used to inhabit back in Pakistan: a dance performance to her beloved Punjabi songs. Hers, however, is a desire bound to remain unfulfilled.

In introducing this episode, I asked what happens if the hijra clap gets performed in Rome, after a waacking show, in a trendy Pigneto queer bar. On the basis of the fieldwork vignette that I drew above, the most straightforward answer to such question would be that, technically, *nothing* happens. Nothing at all, in fact: nobody notices the clap; the show ends; Atif does not get the chance to dance; and the evening takes a completely different turn, as Atif and I end up having biryani from our favorite restaurant, located in an adjacent neighborhood a few blocks away from the bar. And yet, I want to suggest that this semblance of nothingness – of a performance that happens and goes entirely unnoticed (the clap), and of an outright non-performance (the dance) – nonetheless informs moments thick with meaning, on top of also opening up a window into some powerfully mundane dynamics of 'queer' migration from South Asia to Italy that rarely make it to the pages of academic journals¹²¹, or to more popular representations of what queer migration from South Asia to Italy can concretely entail¹²².

¹²¹ Even though there exist numerous excellent ethnographies on queer migrations and/or on queer diasporic communities that do provide attentive analyses of what mundanity and the everyday entail for queer migrants, they almost invariably describe profoundly different contexts from the Italian one. See, among others, Carrillo, 2017; Decena, 2011; Kanaaneh, 2023; Manalansan, 2003.

¹²² A cogent example of what I mean by is provided by the narratives that the association volunteers read during the Pride event under discussion here, all of which more or less loosely revolved around a rather trite, pre-packaged script of suffering, escape, and self-discovery.

I want to start this exploration of meaning-in-mundanity by reiterating a simple yet crucial point: during the show, Atif is not merely applauding the waacking performance right in front of us – too much in front of us, in fact. She is hijra-clapping it. And the two things, albeit partially confounding one into the other, do not fully overlap. The peculiarly stiff clap that Atif enacts both during and after the waacking show – when everybody around him is, indeed, clapping their hands at the dancers – cannot in fact be read as being entirely in continuity with a regular (“*ām*”, in Atif’s words) applause, neither in function nor in style. The only reason why this conflation happens and Atif’s clap goes unnoticed is because of the location where the gesture is enacted. The same gesture that, in that trendy Pigneto queer bar, gets turned by the surrounding unaware audience into an anonymous, entirely negligible – at most, perhaps, bizarre – way of clapping one’s own hands, anywhere else across South Asia would have instead instantly be perceived and recognized as an unmistakable indicator of hijra presence, easily detectable, both in sight and sound, by hijras and non-hijras alike (Pamment, 2019, p. 141; Reddy, 2005, p. 136; Zimman and Hall, 2009, pp. 175-177). As famously argued by anthropologist Gayatri Reddy (2005), and contrary to what hijras’ widespread qualification as individuals belonging to the in/famous realm of the ‘third sex/gender’ seems to invariably point to (see also Hossain and Nanda, 2020; Nisar, 2022), hijra identity extends well beyond the realms of the strictly sexual and/or gendered, resisting reduction to these two analytical frameworks alone. The one formulated by Reddy is an argument intended to foster a much broader and more nuanced understanding of hijra life as resulting from complex interplays of kinship, desire, embodiment, religion, and ritual practice, and as constantly tending towards negotiations of *izzat* (which she translates as ‘respect’)¹²³ (see also Dave, 2011). While always keeping this larger complexity in mind, the hijras’ “signature clap” (Roy, 2015, p. 1) can indeed be taken up as a site where hijra identity’s abundance over an exclusive framework of gender/sexuality manifests in particularly explicit ways, as it is (also) through the enactment of this peculiar sonic and bodily gesture that hijras, as well as other feminine, gender-defiant embodiments like the kothi or the murat, come into being as such into the South Asian public sphere. Given its centrality as a marker of hijra identity itself – Atif once described it to me as their “logo”, their “stamp” (fieldnotes, 01/25) –, the clap enables community members to fulfill a number of different, if related purposes: first of all, clapping allows hijras to recognize themselves, to “find each other (sonically and/or visually)”, and thus to communicate among themselves even at a distance (Pamment, 2019, p. 142; see also Hall, 1997; Zimman and Hall, 2009, p. 176); secondly, it is used to unapologetically signal hijra presence to a non-hijra public – if necessary, even to shame non-hijra

¹²³ Although to an extent applicable to hijras across India and South Asia more broadly, Reddy’s ethnographic findings refer specifically to hijra life as it unfolds in South India, even more precisely so, in the city of Hyderabad, in today-Telangana.

publics and threaten their downfall into a realm of non-respectability (Reddy, p. 138)¹²⁴; finally, it works as an explicit means to distance in-group from out-group belonging, to signal solidarity within the community, as well as to symbolize identity and *izzat* throughout intra-community relationalities, too (p. 139). As Reddy (2005, p. 138) puts it, “[c]lapping, [...] explicitly marks the liminality of hijra identity and is explicitly deployed to indicate both solidarity and authenticity within this marked category”. In other words, “[t]he clapping of hands, more than any other embodied performance, publicly identifies a hijra. Hijras know that better than anyone else and consciously use this act to mark their identity and negotiate the sentiments at play” (Reddy, 2005, p. 137). As a “troubling performance” (p. 136), loaded with multiple layers of meaning, the clap can in fact convey sentiments as varied as happiness, endorsement, anger, or protest, depending on the context where it gets enacted (Pamment, 2019, p. 142).

The moment that Atif dis/places the signature hijra clap in migration, within a non-South Asian elsewhere – it does not matter at all whether a queer one or not –, its public identificatory purposes invariably fail to take place. And yet, what I want to suggest here is that, even when stripped down of its aura of public intelligibility, the gesture of the clap still manages to do relational work for Atif, while both including and superseding the simple act of applauding a dance performance. As beautifully expounded by Juana María Rodríguez in her *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014), ‘gesture’ as a concept already contains within itself much more than the sheer physicality of bodily movement. She writes (p. 2):

But just as “queer” can function as a noun or as a verb, “gesture” can signal both those defined movements that we make with our bodies and to which we assign meaning, and an action that extends beyond itself, that reaches, suggests, motions; an action that signals its desire to act, perhaps to touch. Gestures emphasize the mobile spaces of interpretation between actions and meaning. Gestures hang and fall; they register the kinetic effort of communication. Even when done in private, gestures are always relational; they form connections between different parts of our bodies; they cite other gestures; they extend the reach of the self into the space between us; they bring into being the possibility of a “we.”

It is an analogous productive ambivalence, as both physical movement and “action that extends beyond itself, that reaches, suggests, motions” (ibid.), that Atif’s clapping-gesture encapsulates here¹²⁵. By sticking to a specifically hijra/she-male-coded performance of the clap, Atif is reiterating and

¹²⁴ Especially when paired with, and/or used in anticipation to, the other hijra-specific practice of exposing one’s own genitalia (see Reddy, 2005, pp. 138-141).

¹²⁵ For a not-too-dissimilar argument formulated, however, with reference to a much more in-depth discussion of *giddhā* performances as enacted by *muratan*-identified people in Punjab, see Johal and Sunar, 2025. The fact that we both rely on Rodríguez’s (2014) conceptualization of the gesture to shape our reflection is a pleasant coincidence, as I was not aware of their chapter when I first started drafting this thesis section. I thank my dearest friend and colleague Ludovica Tozzi for suggesting I read the chapter in question.

materializing a connection between her and the leading dancer of the waacking group, to whom she is immediately, visibly, and excitedly drawn by way of a certain common transgender-like modality of being in the world that they both share, and that Atif immediately perceives, notwithstanding her unfamiliarity with waacking itself as a historically queer style of movement (see Bragin, 2014)¹²⁶. It is thus here, at this juncture, that the clap turns from simple gesture (noun) into *gesturing* (verb) (Rodríguez, 2014): by loudly and stiffly bringing her hands together, Atif is not merely clapping at the dancer's skill and talent, period. From that uncomfortable but non-negotiable front row seat proximity, Atif is rather unsuspectingly clapping the young Italian dancer *into* a new commonality of accented (Khubchandani, 2020) transgender: that is to say, into her own hijrascape, what Adnan Hossain, Claire Pamment, and Jeff Roy (2023, p. 4) define as “the multi-layered, multi-scalar, and multi-sensorial movements and flows that constitute *hijra-khwaja sira-trans* relationalities, lifeworlds, and imaginaries within and across different cultures and societies”. The dancer might as well be unaware of it, but she is nonetheless being interpellated by Atif as a fellow she-male¹²⁷, in a space where ‘she-male’ cannot possibly function as an identificatory marker for any of the other people present, be they sitting among the audience or dancing up on stage¹²⁸. Contrary to what happens, for instance, during the association in-office meeting (see Section 2.2.2.), the on-stage waacking performance opens up moments – surely ephemeral, but meaningful nonetheless (Muñoz, 1996) – when it barely matters what epistemologies of queerness/lgbt-ness transgender attaches itself to¹²⁹. Momentarily no longer drenched in queer/lgbt+ discourse, transgender returns bodily and emotional matter, imbued, as such, with the potential to tie together two bodies firmly located at the opposite ends of the stage – of both the architectural stage of the club, and the epistemological stage of queerness: one up, fiercely waacking, all eyes on her; the other down, sitting – albeit rigorously in the first row –, anonymously but

¹²⁶ Waacking refers to an improvisation-based technique of dancing, born during the 70s in the gay, mostly Black and Latino underground disco clubs of Los Angeles. The style is characteristically identified by the fast and rhythmic whipping of the arms (Bragin, 2014), also typically seen in some forms of voguing. For a more detailed discussion of the styles, politics, and history of waacking, including its more recent resurfacing starting from the 2000s, see Bragin, 2014.

¹²⁷ Albeit now considered by many to be deeply offensive and politically incorrect, ‘she-male’ was the term most frequently used by Atif to refer to herself, at least when talking to me. Even if its frequency might partially reflect Atif's attempt to accommodate language so as to make it more intelligible to me – for example by refraining from using markers of identity/community in Urdu or Punjabi like ‘murat’ itself, which she only mentioned at much later stage of our relationality –, I will nonetheless respect her linguistic choices and employ this label to refer to her, alternating and/or accompanying it with transgender, gay, khusra, and murat, as well as with hijra as a broader umbrella term, exactly as she did during our interactions.

¹²⁸ Historically, the discursive impossibility to rely on ‘she-male’ as a viable term of identification or self-identification in a progressive, trans-inclusive, and queer/lgbt-coded space, as the Pigneto queer bar under discussion is, is tied first and foremost to what is considered to be one of the most blatant examples of academically-institutionalized transphobia: i.e., the book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) by American radical feminist Janice Raymond.

¹²⁹ Similarly, it hardly matters outside the bar, in the city streets, or while waiting in line for her fast-food order to arrive: all occasions when Atif manages to clock ‘transgender’ from miles away, and to have her own ‘transgender’ get enthusiastically clocked in turn.

wholeheartedly clapping transgender into hijra, and Pigneto into Pakistani Punjab¹³⁰. In other words, accenting both transgender and Pigneto with a hijra/she-male/murat cadence – or, at least, attempting to do so.

In describing Atif’s hijrascape in migration as accented transgender¹³¹, I am consciously stretching out, perhaps to the point of deformity, the analytic of the accent and of the accented style of queerness, as developed by performance scholar and drag artist Kareem Khubchandani in her ethnography of Indian gay nightlife *Ishtyle* (2020). The concept of *ishtyle* (i.e., ‘style’ in an Indian accent) is described by the author to serve “as a useful rubric to consider performances of cultural difference across geopolitical scales while also demonstrating the historically politicized nature of Indian accents and habitus” (p. 5), as well as “as a tool to name performances of cultural difference, and to consider the stakes of violating the dominant aesthetics and politics of nightlife across geopolitical scales” (p. 184). In crafting this analytical instrument, Khubchandani is speaking to and from a specific social location, comprised by middle-class Indian and diasporic Indian gay men’s experiences of nightlife, both in India itself and in its U.S.-based diasporas. It is in the music-filled and erotically-charged spaces of gay nighttime leisure, the author argues, that these otherwise ‘global’ subjects “accent[...] the night” (p. 2) with their vernacularly-inflected dance and music, bodily movements and gestures, tastes and aesthetics, which are drawn from, while also re-drawing these men into, common affective and cultural repositories of *ishtyle*: vernacular styles of dance and music, Bollywood, Indian diva-hood, shared pop culture references, and more. Against this background, through both their researcher and drag persona, Khubchandani sets to explore the following questions (p. xxiii):

what styles are given value; what are the politics, histories, and circulations of these styles; how do people perform in line with and against dominant stylistic codes; what new forms of relation are made when performances grind against the dominant aesthetics of nightlife?

While drawing profound inspiration from this set of questions to formulate my own analysis of Atif’s embodied occupational strategies inside the space of the Roman queer bar, I also want to suggest that, in the case of contemporary migratory movements from South Asia to Italy, the analytic of the accent and *ishtyle* cannot simply be utilized as such. Instead, its boundaries have to be stretched well beyond

¹³⁰ I am aware that by laying an equation between the whole of Pakistan – at most, the region of Punjab – and the micro-scale of Pigneto, I am reiterating an unbalanced power differential through geography. I am however compelled to do so for privacy reasons, as I do not want to disclose too many details of Atif’s background – something that a further down-scaling of the analysis to the level of the city or the neighborhood, also in relation to Pakistan, would inevitably force me to do.

¹³¹ Similarly to ‘she-male’, the reason why I use ‘transgender’ here and elsewhere when referring to Atif, is because Atif herself employs the label to talk about herself, even if she does so in ways that often stretch out and deform the borders of the term, as conventionally understood in the ‘t’ of ‘lgbt+’. See earlier on in this thesis, Section 2.2.2. For a brilliant decolonial critique of the circulation of ‘transgender’ in India and South Asia more broadly, see Dutta and Roy, 2014.

Khubchandani's original formulation on several levels: first of all, and quite obviously so, beyond the nationally-bound geographical and social categories of India and Indian, as well as of its U.S.-based diasporic dimension, in a move to account for the experiences of subjects who shift from 'peripheries' of South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh)¹³² to another 'periphery' of South Asian diasporas (Italy)¹³³; secondly, beyond the category of middle-class gay identity, to encompass the much more varied nuances of class-inflected sexually- and gender-defiant incorporations and identifications that make up the lived realities of the participants in this research; and, finally – as subsequent sections of the discussion will illuminate – beyond the spatial and social realm of (gay) nightlife itself, as a conscious strategy to recognize the unexpectedly defiant, relational, and erotic potential that, even in the absence of, and/or difficulty to access, the architectural stage of the gay club, spaces as varied as the lgbt+ association waiting room, the administrative office, the street corner, the fast-food restaurant, and the social media account can acquire. In doing so, I am not really performing an act of theoretical rebellion against the limitations inherent in the lens of ishtyle – although I wish I was theoretically-versed and academically-cool enough to do that. Rather, I am actively picking up on the invitation that Khubchandani himself extends to his readers, mindful as he is of these same limitations that I am retracing here, and that come to shape the sonic, gestural, and erotic possibilities of nightlife itself: an invitation to take responsibility for “danc[ing] with strangers and [...] danc[ing] strangely” (p. 26); for “creat[ing] more social spaces in which minoritarian subjects feel cared for, feel strange, feel embraced by their strangeness, feel at home, feel home” (p. 190). By tending to Atif's gestural strategies, I am only picking up these exhortations on paper, in the comparatively much duller space of the academic text, rather than in the bodily-dense locations of nighttime leisure, but I am attempting to do so nonetheless.

¹³² The designation of Pakistan and Bangladesh as 'peripheries' of South Asia does not imply ontological marginality or diminished significance of either of the two states in the overall geopolitical order of the region. Rather, it points to an epistemic hierarchy within the production of knowledge on South Asian queerness specifically, in which India has tended to function as the primary referential center for many years. The term therefore describes a condition of discursive marginalization within academic scholarship, not a geopolitical or cultural valuation. Recently, several contributions have started to unsettle the abovementioned epistemological order dominant across academic discourses on South Asian 'queerness', by taking both Pakistani and Bangladeshi formations as points of enunciation for 'queer', sexually/gender defiant knowledges. See, among others, the book *Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere*, edited by Omar Kasmani (2023); the paper “De-Indianizing Hijra: Intraregional Effacements and Inequalities in South Asian Queer Spaces” by Adnan Hossain (2018); or the volume *Badhai: Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trans Performance Across Borders in South Asia*, co-authored by Adnan Hossain, Claire Pamment, and Jeff Roy (2023).

¹³³ Similarly, I refer to Italy as a 'periphery' of Europe not to suggest inferiority or marginality, but to rather indicate its relational position within intra-European hierarchies. In migration studies, Italy is commonly located within a Southern/Mediterranean model, characterized by structural precarity, and by its role as a site of arrival, transit, and border enforcement within EU migration regimes, rather than as a coveted destination for migrants themselves. This peripheral positioning is also evident in discussions of queerness and lgbt+ rights, where Northern and Western European contexts are often treated as paradigmatic, while Italy is framed as secondary or lagging behind – and understandably so. The term thus describes a structural and discursive configuration, rather than an intrinsic condition.

Atif herself unfailingly disattends each of the primary markers that ishtyle attaches itself to: i.e., Indian, middle-class, gay man. Similarly, Italian queer sociality tends to occlude the possibility for ishtyle and accentuation to occur productively, given that, at the time of writing, there exist virtually no spaces articulated along the lines of both queerness and South Asianness (or variations of the two), commensurate to those taken into account by Khubchandani herself: no *Jai Ho!* parties and no LaWhore Vagistans¹³⁴; but also, no Clubs Kali (Dj Ritu and Marshall, 2022, pp. 92-93), and no SALGAs (see Gopinath, 2005, pp. 16-20; 159-161)¹³⁵, just to name a few popular examples. As a result, within the space of the Roman queer bar, Atif's expression of sexual/gender defiance becomes, indeed, accented, but it does so with a Pakistani/she-male accent so thick that it paradoxically stops being perceived as language altogether, and Atif's hijra clap – the most thickly-accented gesture of all – simply goes unnoticed, confounding into applause as no one is able to read it as proper communication in the first place. In other words, in its travels from Pakistan to Italy, from Punjab to Pigneto, the hijra clap acquires an accent but entirely loses linguistic power, thus becoming, in the process, a monodirectional gesture indeed. Suffice it to think that it only manages to get detected by one other person in the room (me), who is not, however, the same person that the gesture is interpellating (the dancer). And yet, for Atif, it is a mono-directionality that does not necessarily diminish the relational potential that the gesture is imbued with from the start. If anything, as the rest of the discussion will now show, it infuses it with further meaning, which eventually ends up exceeding this one-way channel of relationality, too.

By the end of the waacking show, this meaningful yet ephemeral thread of trans-hijra relationality that the clap establishes melts into thick sound as the rest of the audience bursts into applause. The clap's potential, however, does not altogether dissipate at this juncture. By relying again on Rodríguez's (2014, p. 2) intuition, I want to suggest that as an "action that signals its desire to act, perhaps to touch", the clapping gesture also constitutes the bodily movement by way of which Atif's desire *to dance* gets channeled and starts to manifest. That of establishing a relational connection with the young Italian trans dancer up on stage is, no doubt, a powerful move for Atif. But it is not, in and of itself, sufficient. Similarly, watching the waacking performance from the emotional and physical proximity accorded to her by her accurately chosen first row seat is for Atif necessary – imperative, even. It is, however, still not enough. Atif wants to dance. And note, she does not want to waack –

¹³⁴ LaWhore Vagistan is Khubchandani's drag persona.

¹³⁵ With this, I neither want to imply that the South Asian social and cultural configurations which developed in places like the U.K. and North America represent a more advanced step in a temporal scale of diasporic development that Italy should aim to reach; nor that visibility and/or community-formation along the lines of 'queerness' and 'South-Asianness' must constitute an ideal to which to aspire. I rather want to situate this research in the concrete materiality of its context, which often makes it at least partially incommensurable to the widespread academic lens of a South Asian 'queer diaspora' (e.g., Gopinath, 2005).

some-day, some-where else. Hers is a very concrete and immediate desire, which manifests as soon as the waacking performance wraps up and the stage empties, on the heels of a certain frenzy that the sight of the young Italian trans woman up on stage stirs within her: a desire to improvise her own accented dance show, to her own preferred ishtyle of music – the same music she would dance and clap to during functions, back in her she-male days in Pakistan. It is a desire that gets activated, through memory, by the on-stage performance in front of her: not so much by waacking in and of itself – Atif manifests no interest whatsoever towards it specifically¹³⁶–, as by the architectural proximity of a stage in the first place, as well as by the physical presence of a dancing, feminine transgender body on that same stage. And yet, when Atif thinks that the vacated stage has finally become available for her to occupy it, her desire gets deferred, if not entirely denied, on the very pragmatic pretext that the Pride event has ended and no other performance is envisioned for the day.

Needless to say, the implications of this deferral reach much further beyond practical issues of scheduling. Allow me to indulge in some cheap speculation for a moment. At this point, one could as well argue that if, instead of Atif, it had been the whitest, most Italian gay boy in the room to go to the social worker and ask her permission to put on, let's say, some good old Lady Gaga, go up on stage and dance, the reaction that he would have been met with would have been, most likely, the same: the event is over; it is not possible to dance any further; we can think about organizing something else in the future – we know the script. Would have the hypothetical Italian white boy asked in the first place, though? And in fact – resorting now from speculation to reality – he did not. It is not by chance, I argue, that it is the hyper-accented-to-the-point-of-unintelligibility, brown, ambiguously-transgender body the one who manifests an aspiration to cross over the other end of the stage – from anonymous audience member to star of the show. In short, what I am suggesting through this consciously stereotypes-infused moment of speculation is that, if, on the one hand, the denial that Atif is met with cannot indisputably be read as a direct consequence of her racialized, gender-ambiguous, migrant positionality, her desire, instead, can. The inherent power of performance to generate surges of future-oriented belonging among its audiences – as firstly theorized by Miranda Joseph (2002) and then famously picked up by José Esteban Muñoz in his landmark formulation of utopian

¹³⁶ Needless to say, Atif's case does not exhaust all the possibilities surrounding the relationality between waacking and South Asia. In fact, it is not like waacking and South Asia are two entities that do not speak to each other, or that exclude one another invariably. On this regard, see, for instance, the 2024 Indian show *Waack Girls* (dir. Soonie Taraporevala); or the experiences of dancers Tejasvi TeeJ Patil and Ayushi Amrute.

Several press articles and interviews online discuss both the show and the experiences of the dancers. See, for instance, Mollan, C. (2024) The US gay clubs dance style from 1970s headlining an Indian show. *BBC News* [online], 27 December. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgq14x3yz87o> [Accessed: 24/02/2026]; Rane, S. (2019) Set the Stage: Tejasvi's Journey in Dance. *RedBull* [Online], 3 October. Available at: <https://www.redbull.com/in-en/set-the-stage-tejasvi> [Accessed 24/02/2026]; Laisram, R. (2024) Ayushi Amrute, one of the OG waacking artistes in India, on the Dance Your Style World Finals, her craft and lots more!. *Indulge Express* [Online], 8 November. Available at: <https://www.indulgeexpress.com/culture/dance/2024/Nov/08/ayushi-amrute-one-of-the-og-waacking-artistes-in-india-on-the-dance-your-style-world-finals-her-craft-and-lots-more> [Accessed 24/02/2026].

performativity (2019; see further on in this chapter) – partially fails Atif here: while clapping the lead dancer into an affective and embodied trajectory of trans-hijra attachment, she is in fact at the same time also manifesting a profound detachment from the specific aesthetic codes of queerness that both the dancer’s performance, as well as the event as a whole, are embedded in, and she is doing so exactly through the expression of her own desire to dance, which the clap accompanies and manifests. Hers is a level of dissatisfaction – of boredom, restlessness, non-comprehension: in other words, of exclusion from the collectivizing potential of performance, from performance’s “community of interlocutors” (Muñoz, 2019, p. 106) – that only climbing up the vacated stage of the queer bar and starting to dictate the new stylistic (e.g., sonic and bodily) codes of the evening might resolve. What I thus ultimately and most emphatically want to suggest here is that Atif’s is a desire that contributes to expose some of the otherwise hidden politics of the Roman queer bar – more specifically, the politics of style of the Roman queer bar, which are, at the same time, politics of race, class, language, history, nation, memory, and affect. But also, more ambitiously, the politics of location (see Rich, 1984) of queer theory itself, including its more racially-sensitive declinations, conglomerating under the banner of queer of color critique (see, e.g., Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Manalansan, 2018).

Far from being frivolous dimensions, by dictating how queer spaces can sound and look like, style, taste, aesthetic, and performance subtly but pervasively work to establish what bodies are allowed to be heard and seen in such queerly-inflected sound- and visual-scapes of sociality and leisure (Khubchandani, 2020). Atif’s tastes, aesthetics, and desires find no place in the Roman queer club exactly because the latter thrives on presumably global, yet extremely situated, linguistic and aesthetic codes of ‘queer’ – of what queer is and of where the history of queer is located, among other things (see e.g., Kasmani, 2023). From the invoked celebration of the Stonewall riots to the reading of the Italian translation of Susan Stryker’s (2023) by-now canonical text; from the waacking performance to the concept of Pride itself: specificities of queerness’ language, history, nation, belonging, and presumed globality are inscribed into the very aesthetic and citational fabric of the Roman queer bar and of the Roman lgbt+ association more broadly, albeit often in subtle and non-linear ways. In this sense, the issue at stake both is and, at the same time, is not one of intersections. Better yet, it is, but only as long as those intersections are made to unfold through the additional layers of taste and style, aesthetic and performance, in ways that consciously eschew strict identity politics (see Khubchandani, 2020, p. xxiii) and instead attend to Avery Gordon’s (2008, p. 3) simple yet dense pronouncement that “life is complicated”: “a theoretical statement that guides efforts to treat race, class, and gender dynamics and consciousness as more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply” (p. 5). This does not mean that these more established axes for intersectional analysis stop being meaningful here.

And in fact, class, just to name one, cogently provides a compelling lens – the most compelling one, in a way (see Pamment, 2010, p. 31) – through which to make sense of Atif’s personal affective and aesthetic archives of defiant sexuality and gendered embodiments, both before and after migration (see further on in this chapter, Section 2.3.). What this proposition rather suggests is that these axes can, and often do, acquire a much more granular, at times ambivalent texture. And indeed, neither waacking, nor Susan Stryker or Stonewall are, per se, normative and exclusionary – neither are they all white, middle-class, and/or cisgender, for that matter. And yet, they nonetheless participate in normativization work insofar as they conglomerate into the fixed codes of what queerness is, of what queerness looks and sounds like, and of whom queerness interpellates and caters to, thus coming to haunt (Gordon, 2008) the space of the queer bar with their unflinching, albeit not always necessarily explicit, ubiquity. Failing to show interest and fluency in this specific *style* of queerness – in this case, one might say, queerness spoken in Italian yet with an American accent, i.e., with the one cadence that gets to be neutralized as the ‘non-accent’ par excellence – results in Atif’s clapping gesture becoming unintelligible, in Atif’s desire becoming unfulfillable, and in Atif’s dance becoming unperformable. In other words, in Atif’s stylistic and affective exclusion from the space of the Pigneto queer bar, while being physically located right inside it. Just like there is a geography (Kasmani, 2023, pp. 4-5) and geopolitics (Arondekar and Patel, 2016) to (queer) theory, so there is also a geography and geopolitics to (queer) *style*. In fact, the two of them are often deeply embedded in one another. Far from being inconsequential or peripheral to the concrete unfolding of the everyday politics of life in queer migration, then, the realm of *style* – broadly understood to encompass aesthetics, tastes, desires, affects, gestures, performances, and sounds – occupies, instead, its own reserved seat in the very front row of analysis. Incidentally, in the same front row that Atif chose for us during the waacking show. After all, as Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 12) beautifully puts it, aesthetics “provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us”.

2.3.1. Dancing One’s Way through Migration: Dis/Placing Mujra Transnationally

In making my way towards the second half of this discussion – a discussion which, once again, started off from a small hand gesture, but drifted away from its confined bodily specificity quite early on –, it is to Berlant’s (2011, p. 12) evocative image of a “too closeness of the world” that I want to momentarily return, and in the related realm of ambivalence characterizing physical proximity – in this specific case, the physical proximity of the dance stage – that I want to briefly, further dwell.

All throughout the exchanges described in the ethnographic vignette that I started this section with (see #1), the coveted space of the stage remains a very material, very close companion to Atif's desire, towering as it does right in front of her, so close that she might easily climb it if only given clearance to do so. And yet, as thoroughly discussed, this material presence/proximity is not enough to grant her access neither to the proper space of performance itself – to the space which would allow for Atif's own accented performance to actually occur – nor to the collective sense of belonging accorded to performance's audiences, i.e., to performance's "community of interlocutors" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 106). If anything, it is exactly the coupling of Atif's detachment from the staged performance and its queer styles, on the one hand, with Atif's proximity to the stage itself, on the other, to generate her (temporarily) bound-to-fail desire. And yet, this co-presence of the architectural stage of the queer bar with the equally-material impossibility for Atif to go up that same stage also represents a juncture that complicates the possibility to draw any easy conclusions on the fruition of space – queer-coded space, even more so – by racialized, hyper-accented, sexually/gender defiant bodies in migration: on how access to queer space(s) in migration is granted, denied, negotiated, longed for, or disregarded; on how inclusion and exclusion are spatialized in migration, and through what grounds; but also on what counts as inclusion and exclusion in the first place (see e.g., Held, 2017; 2023; Kawale, 2003; Pinelli, 2017)¹³⁷. In fact, not only physical access to the club is not sufficient to rule out dynamics of (stylistic, classed, racialized, and affective) exclusion from it; perhaps even more crucially so, the inadequacy of having physical proximity to the stage for the accented dance performance to happen also does not automatically mean that such dance never happens, period. Quite the contrary, as two additional ethnographic vignettes will now begin to illustrate (see #2 and #3), Atif manages instead to creatively carve out her own variegated modalities of literally and metaphorically dancing her way through life in migration, and across the richest assortment of stages, which, in all of their apparent improbability, still allow her to dictate what the accents and the styles of her performances will be. In order to be able to see these other moves – be they actual dance moves or otherwise (see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three: Walking) – it becomes imperative to redirect one's own gaze away from the ambivalent too-closeness of the architectural stage of the queer club, and into other spaces where, most of the time, performances are neither supposed nor expected to take place – be they a

¹³⁷ Here, Barbara Pinelli's (2017, p. 11) words on dynamics of refugees' inclusion/exclusion prove particularly spot-on, as they further help contextualizing Atif's case within the broader scenario of refugee migration to Europe: "[M]igration is a long struggle that takes place within social and political borders, temporally and spatially spread out along the lives of migrants, in a continuous gap between formal and substantial recognition of rights and in the hierarchies of exclusion that continue to condition migrants' lives even after they obtain residence permits. At the same time, not being admitted to the political, economic and social body and living along the margins of vulnerability does not mean that refugees do not engage in a struggle against the social and political order they are forced to live in, deploying capital, a sense of time, resources and experiences (even comprising strategies and ways to get by) to identify arenas of action and intervene on their own lives."

street corner, an office, a waiting room, a fast-food restaurant, or a roadside café. Atif might not be able to go up on stage in that Pigneto queer bar, but she manages to find her own ways to dance anyway. As the following vignettes will illustrate, she does so by crafting stages out of tables and phones and cramped rooms, and by dictating what the sounds, gestures, and styles of her own performances will be, even where no proper stage whatsoever seems to be available for her to dance on.

Dance Performance #2

Almost half a year has passed since the Pride event in the Pigneto queer bar that Atif and I have attended together. We haven't met since late summer, when Atif abruptly decided to leave his camp, exit the *accoglienza* system, and temporarily leave Italy to follow her then-boyfriend someplace else in Europe (see further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.). We have managed to arrange a meeting in Rome only after circa six months apart, during which we sporadically communicated through messages and a few, brief videocalls. Atif is now living in a smaller town in a different region north of Rome, but has requested The Rainbow Hub for an appointment. She hopes to be put in touch with the local lgbt+ association in her new hometown, and needs some clarifications on how to find a new housing solution, as well as on what are the available options for facial-hair removal and hormone therapy in her new city.

Since we are early for the appointment, Atif and I decide to kill some time in a café not too far from the association's neighborhood. We are sitting in front of each other at a small outside table, trying to warm up in the chilly January afternoon with our hot beverages, when all of a sudden Atif decides to videocall her *chela*, who is currently living in Saudi Arabia. When she answers, Atif lets her talk to me for a while: from what I am able to pick up on from the grainy screen, just like Atif, she too sports a short hairstyle and a conventionally-masculine sartorial attire, while unmistakable bouts of accentuated femininity crop up in her voice, gestures, and overall body language. The small talk between us is not the most relevant component of this phone-mediated exchange, however. Soon after the introductory bits of conversation are over, Atif decides that she and her *chela* will put up a dance show in front of me – and, in a way, for me – through the screen of the phone. Using my phone as a speaker for the music, Atif puts on a YouTube video titled 'NON STOP PAKISTANI PUNJABI MUJRA DANCE' and the performance begins. The whole thing unfolds roughly as follows: for the most part, Atif makes me hold her phone with the screen facing in her direction, so that she can dance in front of her *chela*, while in turn being able to see her *chela* dancing in front of her from the phone front-camera. Once in a while, then, Atif takes the phone and turns its screen to me so that I can see simultaneously both her own moving body, as well as the *chela*'s pixelated dance moves in the blue-tinted-wall room in Saudi Arabia – and inside the phone – where she is performing from. Hence, what

I have the chance to attend is a (quite literally) transnational guru-chela mujra performance, whose workings end up resembling a complex play of mirrors: there is Atif, dancing with the upper part of her body while sitting in a roadside café table somewhere in Rome; there is Atif's phone, which mediates between her and her chela, and allows these dance exchanges to happen in the first place; there's the person inside Atif's phone, who dances, while in Saudi Arabia, to the rhythm of the Punjabi music which is, in turn, playing from my phone, again in Rome; and, finally, there are the people inside my own phone – professional mujra dancers performing on an otherwise anonymous stage somewhere in Pakistan –, whose recorded mujra sonically and, to a lesser extent, visually accompanies the live mujra(s) unfolding in front of me. Meanwhile, everything and everyone on the roadside of that lively Roman street – lined up on both sides with cafés, restaurants, shops, and messily parked cars, and traversed by a vast array of people who come and go – get momentarily turned into the at times unaware, more often perplexed audience of this phone-mediated sensual-yet-amusing dance show. A show which results from the triangulation of Rome, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, and which is content with taking up a dingy roadside table as its literal, material stage.

Dance Performance #3

A few minutes after the abovementioned roadside dance show, Atif and I leave the café and reach the association, right on time for her appointment. As it is often the case, we are asked to wait for the coordinator of the *sportello*: she is currently busy with another consultation on the other side of town, but she will join us as soon as she can. Atif is tired. We have spent the whole day roaming around Rome together, and, even though there's still plenty of time ahead, she is worried that she will not make it to the station in time to catch his train back home. She soon begins to show signs of restlessness: she grumbles, and calls out the coordinator's name as if by chanting it, asking where did she end up in her usual theatrical tone, by mixing up Italian, English, and Urdu. The arrival of the other volunteer of the *sportello* – Matteo, a young and gentle guy that Atif seems to be particularly fond of, and who, on top of that, has a soft spot for all things South Asian and has recently travelled to India – shakes things up a bit. We begin to chat passionately about Pakistani and South Asian food, which Matteo and I love to eat, and Atif loves to cook – the perfect combination. Atif shows us some pictures that she took of her dishes, and then promises to bring us home-cooked chicken biryani the next time she will come to the association. Soon after, the conversation jumps over to another topic that, as it should be clear by now, Atif is particularly fond of: music and dance. Atif is sitting on the sofa of The Rainbow Hub's waiting room when she begins to gently humming a tune and to shake her upper body according to the music. I decide to tease her a bit, and when she shows signs of uncertainty on whether to keep on dancing or not, I encourage her to do so. The next thing we know is that talking about

music and softly humming some indiscernible song lyrics has given way, instead, to a proper full-fledged dance performance. Atif asks Matteo if he knows how to dance, but Matteo denies it shyly. He then attempts to enact some stereotyped Bollywood-like dance moves for Atif, by folding his hands together and mechanically shaking his head. Atif doesn't seem too impressed by these efforts. If anything, she seems to find them funny, and even scolds him by telling him that those that Matteo is doing are Hindu [*sic*] gestures – and as such, she seems to imply, they have nothing to do with her. It is at this point that Atif decides to stand up from the sofa, to pick a good enough musical accompaniment from YouTube – a video of a *mujra* performance to Punjabi music similar to the one that she danced to earlier, outside the café – and to begin dancing around the room for Matteo and me. The setting is definitely not an ideal one for a *mujra* show – for any musical or dance show, to be honest. For one thing, the associations' coordinators are working and making phone-calls behind the counter, while a volunteer is likely to be answering the helpline in an adjacent room, and we thus have to urge Atif to lower the volume of her phone as much as she can. Besides that, the space is narrow and full of potential obstacles: a big plastic chandelier hanging rather low from the ceiling; a glass case full of fragile-looking memorabilia; a small and rugged carpet; a cupboard with flyers piled-up all over it. But Atif doesn't seem to care too much, and skillfully begins to shift around these objects, sensually moving all of her body – her arms, head, and legs – with small but allusive gestures that follow the rhythm of the music and the style of *mujra*, while also humming the song tune at the same time. Somehow, the association's waiting room has turned into Atif's temporary dancing stage, and Matteo and I into her audience. She ends up repeating the performance twice, while also trying to teach a shy but amused Matteo some *mujra* moves. I watch from the sofa, clapping and cheering softly. For five full minutes, Atif remains entirely engulfed in the dance, and stops only when she notices from the room's glass door that the *sportello* coordinator is approaching the building from the other side of the road. Her entry marks the final leg of Atif's show, as she wraps her dance up to welcome the woman in, and move, right after, to the other room where the much-awaited meeting will finally take place.

If the small but dense episode discussed in the previous section enabled us to establish how Atif's sexual/gender defiance becomes hyper-accented in migration, as well as to contextually go through some of the consequences that such a process of accentuation entails, these two new ethnographic vignettes provide the basis to begin filling what had remained, so far, a cumbersome gap in the discussion: had Atif been granted the chance to get up on stage and dance, what would have her dance looked and sounded like? Or, better yet: when Atif does manage to dance – because she does,

notwithstanding the previously discussed denial – what does she dance to, and where, and for whom? In other words, what are the contents, referents, and audiences of Atif’s ishtyle (e.g., of her dance moves and music taste) (see Khubchandani, 2020), that the previously analyzed hijra clap conjures and is part of, but cannot possibly exhaust?

The two dance performances that I got to witness in Rome, as they unfolded on creatively-crafted stages – although constituting only two episodes out of a much wider aesthetic and affective universe that Atif keeps on activating and traversing *also* in migration – both invariably point to a peculiar Pakistani/Punjabi, lower-class aesthetic and visual subculture of erotically-charged dance and music performances, of which *mujra* represents the epitome (Mini and Baishya, 2022; Pamment, 2012; Syeda, 2015; see also Sharma, 2018). Despite its place in the history of the Subcontinent dating back to as early as the Mughal era¹³⁸, in today’s Pakistan *mujra* (*mujrā* / مجرا) refers to “a form of sexually suggestive and expressive dance” (Mini and Baishya, 2022, p. 263) typically performed across lower- and lower-middle class milieus, by a woman lead who “toys with the forbidden by highlighting the female body in a burlesque of typical gendered conventions” (Pamment, 2012, p. 118), in front of a nearly all-male audience. In light of this setting, *mujra* occupies a space of profound ambiguity in contemporary Pakistani society, with its erotically-charged and sexually-allusive moves systematically made to conflate with pornography, sex work, and obscenity (*fahāshī* / فحاشی), and with its practitioners often recast as ‘bad’ and/or ‘deviant’ women, if not as outright prostitutes (Mini and Baishya, 2022, p. 264; Pamment, 2012; see also Syeda, 2015). Because of this ambivalence and notwithstanding their huge popularity among local male, mostly lower-class publics, these dance performances are constantly kept under the attentive, monitoring eye of several government departments, responsible for making sure that the shows comply to local and state-sanctioned anti-obscenity provisions: a preestablished script has to be scrupulously followed, physical contact between dancers is forbidden, and see-through or skimpy clothes are banished (Mini and Baishya, 2022). Religion-infused, class-inflected, and colonially-derived ideals of decency and propriety play an important role in determining the apprehension of *mujra* through the lenses of pornography and obscenity today¹³⁹. As a *mujra*

¹³⁸ As a genre of dance and musical performance, *mujra* has a long history in South Asia dating back to as early as the Mughal era (1526-1857), when it emerged as a form of court dance traditionally performed by *tawaifs* (courtesans) (Syeda, 2015). With the colonial taking over of the Subcontinent by the British and the subsequent spreading of the anti-nautch movement, it did not take long for these traditional performances to begin increasingly being conflated with and recast as straight-up prostitution (Pamment, 2012).

¹³⁹ This framing of *mujra* as a pornographic, and thus inherently ‘immoral’, dance genre does not happen within Pakistan alone – and unsurprisingly, I would add, given the colonial nature of such a stance in the first place. During the 17th Annual Hot Doc Forum, where the documentary *Showgirls of Pakistan* was pitched (see further on in the discussion), BBC journalist and producer Nick Fraser scornfully defined the film as “Pak porn”, mobilizing a category which it would be an understatement to describe as both racist and misogynistic. In an online article by Whitney Mallett (2016) the documentary director is quoted to have responded to such hostile criticism as follows: “Nick saying it’s ‘Pak porn’ and slut shaming the women in the film is the same thing as my Dad going to those shows and then calling them whores”. For a more thorough presentation of the contents and context of the documentary, as well as of its ties with the present research, see further on in this section.

dancer interviewed for Pakistani television harshly reminds the anchor when he attempts to insinuate that some mujra moves are, indeed, suggestive of obscene behaviors: “*Ve kare to yeh performance hai, ham kare to mujrā hai!*” (“If they do it, it’s performance, if we do it, it’s mujra!”) (*Showgirls of Pakistan*, dir. Saad Khan, 2020). That is, charges of obscenity only enter the frame when it is lower-class women who do the dance: while upper-class dancers get to perform relatively undisturbed, the moves enacted by women from lower strata of society get immediately cast through the derogatory lens of mujra (Khan, 2020; Mini and Baishya, 2022)¹⁴⁰. As Claire Pamment (2012, p. 120) also notes, “censorship is not against dance in general but the dancing female body of the lower classes performed in public”¹⁴¹. The peculiar juncture of classist, patriarchal, and (neo)colonial obscenity discourses, and the consequent state-sanctioned scrutiny informing mujra – the milieu where it is performed, as well as the institutional and popular discourses that surround it – together contribute to render mujra stages sites of frequently-enacted physical violence, other than scenes of bodily expression for dancers, and of visual pleasure for audiences (see Morcom, 2013)¹⁴². Cases of stage dancers being attacked, shot, or arrested on charges of vulgarity, as well as of theatres being raided are not unheard of in Pakistani news (Mini and Baishya, 2022; Pamment, 2012; Khan, 2022), and Atif’s reminiscences of her own on-stage presence during her pre-migration, she-male days in Pakistan are tinted by similar, looming specters of violence: of men coming to her after functions for unsolicited sex; of even more explicit threats of rape; but also of recurring news of other dancers being attacked or murdered after having performed.

At this point, a further clarification is due before going forward with the discussion: Atif’s participation in Punjabi mujra subcultures does not at all represent an aberration within a ‘female’-only realm of dance, but rather mirrors a larger transgender/hijra/khwaja sara engagement in performance more broadly as an avenue for both sustenance, as well as collective and individual expression: what,

¹⁴⁰ *Showgirls of Pakistan*, dir. Khan, 2020; see further on in the discussion.

¹⁴¹ This dynamic can be situated within what Pamment (2012) conceptualizes as Pakistan’s obscenity discourse: a regulatory framework through which debates over morality and public decency become translated into gendered cultural politics and state legal interventions. Under this discursive regime, assessments of what is deemed morally acceptable for public consumption have had concrete repercussions for female stage performers, who have been subjected to arrests, public attacks, and censorship on grounds of alleged vulgarity. Theaters have likewise been raided or temporarily shut down, and female dance performances in Punjabi stage dramas were formally prohibited during the Musharraf era – a ban that exemplifies the institutionalization of such moral anxieties within cultural policy (ibid.).

¹⁴² As Anna Morcom aptly points out, it is also necessary to frame such worlds of ‘illicit’ dance into the patriarchal framework that they emerge from, and that they in part contribute to enforce. She writes (ibid.): “The erotic female performer fits into the framework of patriarchy. Women or effeminate men perform and are (in theory) sexually available for (‘real’) men in the audience. Men do not, in the traditional framework, perform erotically for women. Moreover, the dynamics of power and sexuality conflate with those of social status: the performers are low status in comparison to the audience, firstly through being female or effeminate, and secondly, through being lower caste, low caste or non caste females (the case, variously, for devadasis or courtesan style dancing girls) or transgender men (who in their transgender, performing guise, are arguably not countable in mainstream or caste society). For a high caste/status woman to perform in front of low caste/status men would be unthinkable. However, a situation in which women perform for men also creates conflicts and contradictions for patriarchy, and these female or transgender performers exist in liminal spaces, shaped and contained by patriarchy yet also transgressive of it.”

in the broader context of the South Asian region, assembles under the shared banner of *badhai* (*vadhai* in Punjabi: how Atif, too, would refer to it) (Hossain, Pamment, Roy, 2023, p. 2)¹⁴³:

songs, dances, prayers, comic repartee, gesture, touch, intimacies, shock, and/or spectacle that customarily commemorate births, weddings, and other celebratory occasions marking important financial and/ or heteronormative occasions across areas of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and beyond. [...] Performed by hijra, khwaja sira, and trans communities—socially marginalized along the lines of gender, sexuality, class, caste, and religion—*badhai* interacts with a variety of people in a range of spaces, from open streets and shops, to courtyards of houses and private domestic spaces.

Against this background, dance becomes “a distinctive element of transfeminine identity” in Pakistan, albeit one that predictably works “as a paradoxical instrument of exclusion and inclusion within social spaces, relationships, and class boundaries” (Faizan, 2022, p. 5). Indeed, all across South Asia, together with the other strongly frowned upon realms of begging and sex work, dance often represents one of the few avenues left for lower-class trans folks to make a living out of, excluded as they are from most of other deemed-respectable sources of income (see Morcom, 2013). In dance, however, the boundaries between transgender and non-transgender are not necessarily always so definite. As argued by Anna Morcom (2013) in her eponymous study of what she terms the “illicit worlds of Indian dance”, not only are the effeminate and/or feminine-coded transgender bodies of both hijras and kothis the ones that can often be found to thrive in, and thanks to, subcultures of erotically-charged dance performances. Additionally, female dancing bodies, too, are ones that become ‘transgender’ exactly by way of taking part in such ‘illicit’, erotically-dense, and male audience-oriented dancing cultures. That is to say, they trespass the boundaries of heterosexually-sanctioned, upper-class/caste womanhood, through dance (Morcom, 2013). While constituting one of the core components of the specifically trans/hijra realm of *badhai*, then, dance also very much exceeds it, blurring and expanding the boundaries of what counts as femaleness/womanhood, of what counts as transgender, and, consequently, of what counts as gender tout court, too. According to Morcom, in fact, the presence of a female and/or female-coded dancing body in front of a male audience already implies that a rupture of normative expectations of both heteropatriarchy and the gender binary is taking place, one which eventually reveals the “many inconsistencies and ‘cracks’ that belie the limits of the dimorphic gender system” itself (Morcom, 2013, ‘Transgender Erotic Performers in South Asia’). Accordingly, the female and female-coded body who dances erotically – be it the body of a hijra performing *badhai* during a wedding, or of a professional mujra dancer enacting a choreography on a theatre stage, for instance – transgresses and reshapes the confines of both cis- and trans-

¹⁴³ The term, widespread in numerous South Asian languages, literally means ‘gift’ and, as Hossain, Pamment and Roy explain (2023, p. 2), it is “imbricated in webs of reciprocities between performers, ensembles, their lineages and publics”.

womanhood, all the while paradoxically both reproducing and challenging the patriarchal schemas and dynamics that belie the existence of such performances in the first place (Morcom, 2013). Violence and patriarchy are thus but two components of a larger, more ambivalent, South Asian lower-class/caste dancing scene, existing as they do in perennial tension with the visual, sonic, bodily, and relational pleasures and possibilities that mujra, dancing, and performance more broadly open up for their practitioners, in either public or private spaces, be they transgender or not – at times, in fact, becoming ‘transgender’ exactly through performance itself.

When Atif unsuccessfully attempts to perform mujra on the stage of the Pigneto queer bar, and, later on, when she does manage to bring her mujra moves on the makeshift stages that she carves out of erratic interstices of mundanity in migration (see #2 and #3), it is these complex life-worlds of chastised yet subversively enabling embodiments that she is citing and, quite literally, gesturing to (see Rodríguez, 2014). Life-worlds that she used to periodically inhabit and to unravel her gender defiance into while in Pakistan, and that, as the discussion will now illuminate, she keeps on traversing also in migration, both through and beyond the confined space of the enacted dance performance in and of itself. Those she executes are, in fact, particularly dense embodied citations, whose potential is not exhausted by the bizarrely readapted shows that I had the serendipitous chance to attend around Rome. In order to be able to delve deeper into what lies beneath and alongside her half-performed, quickly wrapped up, dance gesture, here I will momentarily shift away from Atif and her ‘displaced’ position as a gender-defiant, part-time amateur mujra dancer in Rome, and move ‘back’ to Pakistan – specifically, to a filmic, and at times purposefully filmi¹⁴⁴, representation of a small group of professional Pakistani mujra performers.

Analogous tensions between violence and pleasure, chastisement and potentiality, suffering and irony, to the ones introduced above, lie at the very narrative and visual core of *Showgirls of Pakistan* (dir. Saad Khan, 2020), a recent documentary film on contemporary Pakistani mujra, which makes the meaningful effort of restoring an intimate and nuanced image of what everyday life materially and affectively entails for erotic dance performers in the country. It does so by following three of them – Afreen Khan, Uzma, and Reema Jaan: two cis-women and a khwaja sara/transgender woman – along the mundane, often violent, yet also incredibly filmi vicissitudes that make up their lives, on and outside the dancing stage (Mini and Baishya, 2022). Without stepping back from documenting the violence that periodically barges in both the stage itself and the dancers’ private lives, *Showgirls*

¹⁴⁴ As Amrita Chakravarty (2023, pp. 186-187) explains, within the South Asian context, “[f]ilmi’ culture, as distinct from ‘film’ culture, refers to a diffuse cinephiliac formation that exceeds a purely textual engagement with films”. More specifically, “[i]t refers [...] to the ways in which cinema is incorporated into everyday life, dialogues, gestures and film aesthetics being appropriated for use in situations ranging from wedding processions to political rallies. Here is cinema interwoven with socialisation itself, influencing how people talk, what they wear, how they relate to each other in love and friendship, how they remember the past and dream of the future”.

of *Pakistan* has the additional merit of keeping these women firmly located inside the thick fabric of distinctively lower-class, online and offline visual culture and styles that their existences so insistently pivot around, and to give back to the viewers a taste of the peculiar aesthetic codes that such visual, but also inevitably sonic, realms thrive on¹⁴⁵. The dance stage is in fact shown to be but one of the locales where mujra women-dancers negotiate and build their personae, the online world providing other additional, extremely significant platforms for them to stage complementary performances of their own selfhood in, as well as to establish threads of relationality with fans, admirers, and fellow dancers alike (on the online circulation and audiences' fruition of mujra videos, see Syeda, 2015). The film adopts two main strategies to convey to the viewer the granular quality of these aesthetic codes (Mini and Baishya, 2022): first, it intersperses the narrative with clips from famous, old-fashioned Lollywood movies, and with accurately chosen popular Pakistani songs and music (for an overview of Lahore's cinematic industry, see Aslan, 2015); and second, it incorporates in the filmic plot amateur video- and audio-footage, respectively shot and recorded by the dancers themselves either for their social media channels (e.g., heavily-filtered Instagram livestreams with their fans, and short videoclips), or on the occasion of more intimate, yet often violent relational dynamics of everyday life (e.g., recordings of more or less angry phone-calls with boyfriends and/or employers). As a result, the documentary overflows with extra-layers of visual and sonic content, which end up superseding the more strictly dance-related dynamics of the on-stage performance, and rather provide a cinematic rendition of the visual/sonic excess that characterizes the everyday lives of the dancers. In an interview with Suroosh Alvi for *Vice* (2021)¹⁴⁶, director Saad Khan locates the dancers' need for such a visual and sonic abundance – epitomized by the women's constant, overflowing production of content for their online profiles, as well as, even more so, by their habit of recording each and every phone exchange and conversation that they have – in the structural lack of justice which characterizes the workings of the Pakistani political and judicial systems, and which mostly affects the lower-strata of Pakistani society that these women belong to. In this context, according to the director, recording sounds and/or images – and, when necessary, reversing them online – becomes a tool for these women to leave a trail of evidence and resort to informal routes to justice, whenever necessary.

And yet, this is only one side of the coin, as this need for visual/sonic abundance is also tied to the aesthetic-cum-relational texture – the two of them cannot be really told apart from one another – that accompanies and structures the mundanity of the dancers' every-day, and that I could frequently see cropping up in Atif's life, too. Launching and/or entering livestreams with fans and fellow dancers,

¹⁴⁵ In the words of director Saad Khan: "Also coming directly from that world [myself], it's very important to see the visual culture of that, you know, working-class kind of entertainment. That was very important." (1:57). And again: "Class is the basic thing... In everything here!" (2:08)

¹⁴⁶ The interview with *Vice* is available on YouTube at the following link, as a coda to the documentary itself: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZmo3MA1jPY&t=7921s> [from 1:44:34 onwards]

constantly making videocalls with friends, sharing on social media tackily-filtered picture after picture, and video and after video, are, in fact, all fruitful tools that work to establish and keep alive thick threads of relationality, which manage to circulate on their own separate channels, exactly by way of the shared codes of mujra-adjacent, class-specific visual culture that these images and videos both belong to and reproduce. It is exactly this aesthetic of on/off-line visual and sonic excess, as well as this excess of aesthetically-coded sonic and visual content, that interest me the most here. And not only because of how neglected these dimensions tend to be in the academic literature on both mujra and hijra/khwaja sara communities alike, notwithstanding their centrality for the unfolding of these people's lives (see Alim, 2023; Flaherty, 2023)¹⁴⁷; but also, because these same realms prove crucial to understand the workings of several meaningful aspects of Atif's trajectory of sexual/gender defiance in migration, too.

Indeed, the main reason why I drifted away from a discussion of Atif's displaced performances of mujra in Rome to delve, instead, into *Showgirls of Pakistan* lies exactly in the documentary's above-mentioned ability to materialize on screen the peculiar way that visual culture – especially, though not exclusively, as it unfolds on image/video-based social media platforms (e.g., Instagram; see Alim, 2023) – works to facilitate the production and maintenance of networks of relationality out of a shared lower-class, erotically-allusive, and unapologetically hyper-feminine sensibility and aesthetic¹⁴⁸. This, in turn, conjures a very similar on/off-line dynamic to the one that I could notice circulating also between Atif and what I soon realized was a broader network of trans/hijra/she-male/murat connections, which existed and persisted notwithstanding the 'dislocated' position that, as a refugee living in Italy and prevented from reentering Pakistan, Atif occupies with respect to Pakistani hijra and mujra subcultures – as the discussion will now clarify, to an extent, exactly by way of such a 'dislocated' position in the first place.

Contrary to the 'showgirls' starring in Saad Khan's documentary, Atif was not a full-time, professional theatre-stage mujra dancer in Pakistan. Her engagement with the dancing world was one rather rooted in her participation in a broader Pakistani hijrascape of *badhai* – via her khwaja sara-adjacent murat positionality (see Sharma, 2018) –, that dancing constitutes a significant component of (Hossain, Pamment, Roy, 2023). Even though many details of Atif's strategies of gender/sexual

¹⁴⁷ While the visual and sonic-scapes inhabited and produced by hijra, khwaja sara, transgender, and/or gender-ambiguous people across South Asia have become object of increasing academic attention (see e.g., Johal and Sunar, 2025; Pamment, 2019; Roy, 2015; 2016; 2023), the role that online visual cultures play for these communities has been, instead, for the most part overlooked. Two meaningful, albeit still limited, exceptions are represented by David Flaherty's (2023) unpublished master's thesis *The Insta-Hijra: South Asian Photographic Performances*, University of North Carolina, and by Tanvir Alim's (2023) paper "Instagram Representation of Trans and Hijra Identities in Bangladesh".

¹⁴⁸ This was achieved mostly through the deliberate, carefully-crafted editing choices, enacted by film editor Joey Chriqui. For more information about the editing process, see again the Vice interview attached as a coda to the movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZmo3MA1jPY&t=7921s> [1:44:34 onwards]

dis/identification have tended to remain opaque to me throughout our research-fostered relationality – fast-changing in their nature as they were, and because further complicated by dynamics of migration itself¹⁴⁹ –, for the entire time that we knew each other, her proximity to a Pakistani/Punjabi-inflected collective sphere of hijraness stayed a constant narrative and embodied presence among us (on hijraness’ regional specificities see e.g., Khan, 2014a; 2014b; 2016; 2019 for Pakistan; Hossain, 2012; 2017; 2018; 2019a for Bangladesh; Shamra, 2018 for Punjab). As already explored in a previous section of this work (see Section 2.2.2.), before embarking on her migration journey out of Pakistan, Atif spent significant chunks of her life as a member of what she would describe to me as local ‘she-male’ (i.e., khwaja sara/hijra) groups. Hers was, however, an intermittent engagement, as conservative family members would forcefully bring her back home, each time she would escape from her house to go living among local hijra groups. It was mostly during these temporal and spatial parentheses of she-maleness – which she managed to carve out for herself between one forced return home and the other –, that dance would come into Atif’s life. Traces of the on-and-off quality of Atif’s presence in these hijrascaples remain visible in the context of migration, too. In line with what observed for other murat-identified people in Punjab (Sharma, 2018), the sartorial realm remains the most prominent one where Atif keeps on sticking to slightly more normative enactments of masculinity in her everyday life: in her ‘camp’, at work, when visiting the Questura offices. Everything else in her posture, instead, points to a deepfelt embrace of theatrical effeminacy and exaggerated femininity, as well as to her high fluency in circulations of murat-ness and proximity to hijraness: from language (i.e., Atif’s ability to speak the hijras’ *farsī zabān*) to body language; from beautification rituals to relational ties and sexual/romantic proclivities (i.e., her sticking to a passive sexual role, while seeking sexual/affective relationships with straight, masculine, and sexually active men only). The previously analyzed performance of the clap testifies exactly to that: a bodily and sonic trace of Atif’s proximity to a specific region- and class-inflected modality of embodying ‘transgender’¹⁵⁰, which she keeps on activating all throughout migration, even when migration itself is what contributes to nullify the clap’s collectivizing power almost in its entirety (see Section 2.3). Something similar happens with mujra. As the two ethnographic vignettes drawn above illustrate (see #2 and #3), mujra does not disappear in Italy: it gets dis- and mis-placed, but it nonetheless keeps on being performed, albeit on different stages of different scales, with different purposes, and for different

¹⁴⁹ Suffice it to think, in this regard, that at the time of the final editing of this chapter – February 2026, only one year later the events being referred to here –, Atif’s strategies of gender defiance have substantially changed, having shifted towards a more decisively woman-oriented version of transness.

¹⁵⁰ I am aware of the criticism of referring to Atif’s gender defiance as a local iteration of transgender (see Dutta and Roy, 2014; see also earlier on in this thesis, section 2.2.2.). However, as previously clarified, transgender is a term that Atif – at least in migration, and at least when interacting with me and the lgbt+ association volunteers – currently and frequently uses (differently from khwaja sara, for instance, which she never employed in my presence).

audiences – one time even by way of creatively bending the rigidity of geopolitical borders through the ingenious deployment of phone-screens and speakers (#2). What the vignettes manage to show only partially, however, is the thread of continuity which ties together those two resurfaced dance performances that I had the chance to attend, on the one hand, to the substratum of dense bodily and visual hijra-mujra subcultures that Atif, too, is part of, on the other. In other words, the deep entrenchment of visibility and relationality which is not at all dissimilar from the one *Showgirls of Pakistan* opens a window into.

When it comes to Atif, it is TikTok to function as the main avenue – as both the host and the producer – of this visual-cum-relational abundance: as the main tool through which Atif accesses and makes her way through a much broader network of transnational trans/hijra/she-male connections, not so much – at least, not only – back in and with Pakistan/Punjab, but, crucially, across Europe as well¹⁵¹. As far as I was able to gather, Atif's interlocutors in the visually-mediated online exchanges that she regularly engages in through her social media presence, are, for the most part, ascribable to two macro-categories: straight, masculine, sexually-active Pakistani men that Atif lusts after, and/or who lust after Atif; and other transgender/hijra/she-male-identified individuals, who, similarly to Atif, migrated to Europe (to Germany, France, Greece, Italy) from either Pakistan or Bangladesh¹⁵², and now manage to get and stay in touch with each other thanks to the visually-dense and aesthetically-coded social media spaces, that a platform like TikTok opens up for them. Starting off in the online realm, these connections shift to the 'outside' world as well, as people, Atif included, periodically travel from all over Europe to gather together during special occasions, such as the birthday parties of elder and/or more influential members of the network (i.e., individuals that Atif herself addresses as 'gurus', notwithstanding her already-existing affiliation with another, 'proper' guru in Pakistan). Hence, producing and reversing visual content on TikTok – and doing it by answering to shared expectations of both style and quantity, which do not have much in common with globalized aesthetics of 'queerness' – are acts that function not only as tools to enact a carefully curated performance of the self online, be it a dancing self or otherwise; that is to say, as proxies for the architectural dance stage, be it the mujra stage of private functions in Pakistan, or the waacking stage of the Pigneto queer bar. But, crucially, also as the means to access a trans-European network of dislocated, scattered trans/hijra/she-male-ness, whose existence and sustenance thrive (also) on online visibility and sonicity, and on consistency of engagement with those same visibility and sonicity in the first place.

¹⁵¹ Crucially, also beyond both Pakistan and Italy/Europe, as the videocall with her chela in Saudi Arabia testifies to. See earlier on in this section, #2.

¹⁵² Atif did mention to me several times the presence of Bangladeshi 'transgender' individuals among the people that she managed to get in touch with through social media. Her affiliations, however, were mostly with people from Pakistan.

Throughout the three-year time span that we knew each other, I lost count of the times Atif either asked me to record, or recorded herself, music-accompanied, 15-second-long TikTok clips of her slowly walking, swaying her hips, running one hand through her hair, and glancing at the phone camera allusively. It didn't really matter whether we were in front of the Colosseum, roaming around during endlessly hot Roman summer afternoons, or inside the dull and silent – silent before we came in, at least – waiting room of a Rome Municipality office, waiting for her new I.D. card to be issued: all the world was indeed a stage for her. A small but unmissable beautification ritual would systematically precede the recording itself – one involving the application of a few puffs of face powder, always a shade or two too light for her skin¹⁵³, followed by a thin veil of shiny, pink lip-gloss – after which, the actual recording could begin. Heavily altered through the use of extravagant edits and beauty-filters, the video would then be uploaded on TikTok, and the rest of the day would go by with Atif almost obsessively checking on the number of likes and comments left underneath the clip in question. When, during one of these impromptu recording sessions, I explicitly resort to ask Atif why she enjoyed making such videos of herself so much, “*Vaise hī*”, she replies: “just because”. “Famous *bannā hai*”: “I want to become famous” (fieldnotes, 05/24). That is, first and foremost, famous on, and thanks to, TikTok: a double route towards successfully establishing trans-hijra connections across her new life in Europe, and potentially finding interested sexual and/or romantic partners as well¹⁵⁴.

Other than to the centrality that such an on/off-line visual realm occupies in the unfolding of Atif's life in migration, the verbalization of such a desire to become “famous” [*sic*] – to establish a durable and recognizable presence on/off-line, in other words – also testifies to the fact that something opposite to Muñozian ephemerality (1996)¹⁵⁵ is at play here, and notwithstanding the fragmented nature of this research's fields, and of the episodes being recounted here. A circulation of an excess, as well as an excessive circulation, of gender/sexually defiant relational styles and ties; one happening through the dissemination of the purposefully durable on/off-line traces that this specific iteration of visual culture allows for, and that has the obtainment of fame and recognition as its expected ultimate

¹⁵³ On the obsession for white skin and the related phenomenon of skin-lightening in South Asian, see e.g., Bhatt, 2024; Nadeem, 2013.

¹⁵⁴ It is, crucially enough, also a channel that exposes her to further violence, both on- and offline. In fact, Atif's gender-defiant positionality is what allows for her sexual/romantic relationships to form in the first place, while also positing Atif at greater risk of psychological and physical violence at the hands of Pakistani men in Italy, often through those same exact relationships. This profound and virtually unsolvable ambivalence proves a constant in Atif's channels of romantic/sexual relationality, also in migration.

¹⁵⁵ The inadequacy of Muñoz's framework of “ephemera as evidence” (1996) as a tool to read Atif's presence on TikTok was pointed out to me after I presented a preliminary, abridged draft of this thesis section as a paper during the ‘Queer Utopias: Imagining Futures without Borders’ seminar in Athens, 28-29 November, 2024. I thank Michael Tristano Jr. for the precious insights he offered me on that occasion: especially for reminding me that with *Cruising Utopia*, too, Muñoz was speaking of and from a very specific position in space and time, and hence that the text cannot be expected to uncritically speak to any other location in space and time. The latter was a topic of conversation with other participants to the seminar as well, and eventually planted the seed for what became the ‘Coda’ of this thesis section (see further on in this section).

outcome. In other words, something that is perhaps better described by what Anjali Arondekar (2023a, p. 3) theorizes as a heuristic of abundance: a “concept-metaphor” that, albeit working “more as a theoretical than descriptive supplement”, works well to resist the by-now ubiquitous identification of loss as the main site where sexuality and histories of sexuality are expected to dwell in – subalternized sexuality all the more so. Ultimately, then, the only site left for ephemerality to keep on exerting some sort of theoretical traction, here, seems to be my own ethnographic engagement with these same on/off-line life-worlds. As a further testimony of the closely classed, gendered, aesthetic, and (trans)regional specificities of these circles, more often than not, I could access and grasp the workings of such visually- and sonically-dense networks of identitarian, affective, sexual and/or erotic relationality only indirectly and fragmentarily – one among the many ethnographic failures that fill this research, and that eventually end up proving just as eloquent as more conventionally and more successfully gathered ‘data’. The “glimmers, residues, and specks” (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10) of this reality that I did manage to grasp are, indeed, ones that strongly adhere to the specific codes of visual and sonic culture described in this section, as well as to the peculiar tapping into visual/sonic culture which characterizes these social circles in the first place. The same modalities and cultural milieus that *Showgirls of Pakistan* openly and frankly captures, and that also other recent Pakistan-based cinematic products – the short film *Darling* and the incredibly successful feature film *Joyland* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2020 and 2022 respectively), among others – more or less loosely orbit around. As already anticipated, very little, if any, of the content that Atif both produces and consumes in and outside the internet – including her improvised dance performances – has something to share with the unwritten aesthetic codes and citational genealogies of the Roman queer bar, or of globalized/Americanized queerness more broadly. Rather, it speaks to a sensibility which is both regionally, as well sexually/gendered inflexed: that of the Punjabi murat, and of the ‘hijra’ life-worlds that surround her. With that, once again, I do not want to encourage a hyper-culturalized reading of Atif’s strategies of gender/sexual defiance in migration (see Cantú, 2009). If anything, and as repeatedly stressed before, the peculiar juncture that Atif herself inhabits is one deeply informed by all the axes of sociality that classic intersectional analysis deems worthy of attention – among which class plays a paramount role (Pamment, 2010, p. 31) – and that a vague reference to ‘culture’ alone would not possibly be able to account for. Rather, what I want to suggest is that reading Atif’s gestures and moves through and against the culturally-inflected inputs that a documentary like *Showgirls of Pakistan* (2020) depicts and materializes on screen is an operation that helps adding thickness and regionality to the codes of Atif’s own sexual/gender accentuation – i.e., of Atif’s ishtyle (Khubchandani, 2020) –, which are indeed conveyed, but surely not exhausted, by a still-too-vague reference to pan-South Asian ideas

of ‘hijraness’ and/or ‘thirdness’ alone (on the importance of a culturally-sensitive approach to sexual migrations, see Carrillo, 2017).

Before making my way towards the conclusions of this section, there is one final consideration that I want to advance here, in light of what discussed so far about Atif’s dancing and non-dancing movements in migration. Even though this might look exactly like the direction that this whole discussion was trying to take, I still do not think that Atif’s move towards occupying ‘alternative’ stages and performing ‘alternative’ dances presented earlier (see #2 and #3) should be read solely as the result of, and the reaction to, her *exclusion* from the unwritten codes of the Roman queer scene and of the LGBT+ association’s modality of organizing queer sociality more broadly. Quite the contrary, I ultimately refuse to draw a direct, consequential line between Atif’s exclusion from Rome’s globalized/Americanized codes of queerness (i.e., its *styles*), and her mis/placed, accented performances of sexual/gender defiance and eroticism ‘elsewhere’ (i.e., on makeshift stages), be they through *mujra*, amateur videos, and/or bizarre beautification rituals. Albeit not inherently wrong, this is in fact only one side of the story: incidentally, the side that serves more the benefit of critique – of a broader project of critiquing the geographies and epistemologies of queer theory –, than the logics of Atif’s own world-building and meaning-making techniques. And indeed, a concrete risk of romanticization haunts this critical operation, no matter how relevant of a deconstructive move it might serve to advance. In a conversation with Andrea Long Chu on the future of trans studies for *TSQ* (Chu and Drager, 2019), Emmet Harsin Drager identifies the biggest issue at stake with the field of trans studies today in what they term a “problem of narrative” (p. 104): that is, the tacit but pervasive imperative to tell trans stories of either victimhood (i.e., trans stories as tragedies) or resistance (i.e., trans stories as romances), with nothing much in between or beyond these two discursive options left to say. A similar concern looms large, if not larger, on Atif’s case. An ambiguously-transgender, brown, hyper-accented, refugee body, escaped from the violence that she was facing in Pakistan to start a brand-new life in Italy after a perilous journey across the Mediterranean, her story potentially ticks all the criteria for it to be told either as one of über-victimization – incidentally, a strategy that Atif herself repeatedly taps into, also with me – or, alternatively yet somehow also contiguously, as one of heroic, purposeful resistance. “I am much more interested in a satire, a genre about how truly disappointing and sometimes even boring it is to be a trans person in this world” (pp. 104-105), Drager adds, right after diagnosing trans studies’ abovementioned narrative ailment. Without minimizing the role that both suffering and resilience play in Atif’s life almost on a daily basis, I nonetheless believe that a similar lens to the one suggested by Drager better allows to restore on the page the granular quality that Atif’s life ends up acquiring in migration – if not a lens of straight-up satire, at least one of irony. And indeed, what could be more ironic than hoping to crash a carefully planned Pride event with an

impromptu, on-stage mujra performance, in a place where no one even knows what mujra looks and sounds like? Or than worrying about beautifying yourself with the right amount of make-up right before meeting the Territorial Commission that will adjudicate on your asylum case? Or, again, than blasting Punjabi music at full volume and half-dancing to it, from the dingy table of a café in the middle of the sidewalk of one of Rome's busiest streets? I thus want to cling to the sense of wariness that I feel whenever the opportunity arises to tell a story of Atif's gestures and (dance) performances as one of heroic queer resistance, and resort instead to the more mundane sense of satire – of embarrassment and second-hand embarrassment (mine), of absurdity, but also of theatrical excess and of confident brazenness (Atif's) – that followed Atif and me everywhere we went, together, throughout the unfolding of this research and beyond it. What the application of this lens allows one to grasp, I want to suggest, is a significantly different affective universe from those potentially evoked by either victimization or romanticization discourses: one where Atif's confident, ironic, and nonchalant enactments of consolidated Pakistani/Punjabi, lower-class, erotic and aesthetic practices of sexual/gender defiance ultimately convey a fundamental lack of interest – a sense of active indifference, even – towards what the Roman queer bar, and Roman queerness more broadly, have to offer to her. If it is in fact true, as I extensively argued in the previous section, that Atif gets excluded from the sense of community that the Pigneto Pride event is all projected towards building among the minority subjects (Muñoz, 1999) who are imagined as its ideal audience, it is also equally true that Atif does not really care about being included in it in the first place. To put it even more bluntly, by borrowing the words that Saad Khan emphatically employs with reference to the mujra dancers who star in his documentary, “[she] do[esn't] give a shit” about this kind of inclusion¹⁵⁶. If anything, rather than being included in the aesthetic and affective economy that the Pigneto queer bar rests on, what Atif wants to do is to exuberantly substitute those codes with her own; to be the one who dictates the codes themselves, from her front-row seat proximity, first, and from the coveted position up on stage, later. In the disappointment and boredom that often comes to characterize (trans) life (Chu and Drager, 2019), on that peculiar occasion Atif happens not to get the chance to climb up the stage: a minor life hiccup among many others, upon which I, as the ethnographer of Atif's life in migration, have however

¹⁵⁶ For the sake of clarity and contextualization, I report here the full excerpt of Khan's words from the Vice interview: “There is also this thinking [that] we are important, [that] these people [mujra dancers] should have a dialogue with us... They don't give a shit! The people in the film, and working-class people, don't give a shit about representation, because that representation is in a system, which is again not made for them. It's made by other people. So, if the white man, or the upper-class, you know, Pakistani whatever people think that: “Oh this representation is good”, whatever, “We'll give you a seat at the table” They don't necessarily want that. Like, it brings me back to the livestreaming world: these people have created these communities away from the specter of these institutions. They are very fed up with it. Including me. That they don't even want to have that conversation. That “Oh, finally we're ready to give you a seat at the table”. It's the anger talking... But that is the truth, you know?” (2:12)

decided to pivot the entire discussion of her story¹⁵⁷. To restore some sense of proper disappointment to the analysis (see Chu and Drager, 2019) – but also, in a way, to ultimately move beyond that one, too – allow me, then, to briefly return one last time to the scene of the Pigneto queer bar, and to add the finishing touches to the picture starting from which this entire analysis developed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly at this point of the discussion, Atif's disappointment for having seen her access to the dance stage being denied lasts no more than a few minutes. Once the waacking show is over, she exits the theatre room, and immediately and confidently approaches the main dancer near the bar counter. There, she attempts to exchange some words and gestures of admiration with her: they are both 'transgender' after all, and, in that moment, that is a powerful enough channel of commonality flowing between them. Then, again unsurprisingly, Atif asks me to take a short video of the two of them together so that she can post it on her TikTok account – now, this is something that truly matters! And that's literally it, however anticlimactic it might seem: Atif says goodbye to her momentarily-adored dancer, we linger around the bar some more until people begin to disperse, and we eventually decide to go have dinner at our favorite biryani spot, a Bangladeshi restaurant in the adjacent neighborhood of Torpignattara, also known as Rome's 'Banglatown' (see Pompeo, 2011; Priori, 2010). There, once we are done eating and are idly waiting for our leftovers to be packed, without me even realizing it, Atif promptly manages to occupy those brief moments of boredom with some serious, unambiguous flirting, by exchanging sexually-allusive glances with another one of the restaurant's clients – in all likelihood, a perfectly-straight Bangladeshi man who has easily managed to spot Atif's gender ambiguity from afar. Not even an hour after her denied dance show, Atif has, in other words, moved on to the next stage already, as she is again both actively and serendipitously on the lookout for someone – ideally a handsome, muscular, mustache-sporting man – that she can seduce with her unapologetic and brazen performance of she-male femininity: the one performance that, for better or worse, truly does not need a proper stage to shine¹⁵⁸.

2.3.4. Coda. Un-Staging Muñoz's *Stages*: For an Appreciation of Presentness

To anyone even mildly versed in the 'classics' of queer theory, the continuous invocations across these pages of the concept-image of the stage will have, by now, most probably already brought to

¹⁵⁷ By saying this, I am not disavowing my own interpretations of the episode that I provided in the previous section. I still stand by them. However, I also want to highlight their partiality, or, better yet, their specific function in the broader economy of academic critique that this thesis allows for – a function which does not exhaust, however, all of the episode's possibilities.

¹⁵⁸ I specify 'for better or worse' because, as I already anticipated in a previous footnote, the easiness through which this clockability happens does not only work as a source of recognition and potential sexual/romantic pleasure for Atif. It is also the same ground upon which violence against Atif can be, and indeed often does, get exerted. In fact, the whole picture is much more ambivalent than the small episode recounted above, if apprehended in isolation, might lead one to believe.

mind the reflections that late queer and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz formulates in his landmark text *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2019 [2009]). In the chapter titled, predictably enough, *Stages* (pp. 97-113), Muñoz proposes a reading of visual artist Kevin McCarty's photographic depictions of the empty stages of punk and Latino gay clubs in 1990s Los Angeles as dense evocations of the concept of utopian performativity. This is, in turn, "a manifestation of a "doing" that is in the horizon, a mode of possibility" (p. 99) that performance is imbued with, and that acts, first and foremost, on performance's audiences, by drawing them into a newfound togetherness, projected not so much in the present of the performance itself, as in the utopian not-yet-here of queer futurity that performance evokes. As he writes (p.111):

For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and, in some cases, white supremacy.

Incidentally, McCarthy's photos as presented in the pages of Muñoz's book were the first thing that came to my mind when I bumped into a picture of the empty stage of the by now well-known Pigneto queer bar on Facebook, while I was busy double-checking some of the spatiotemporal coordinates of my fieldnotes for the writing of this chapter. That unplanned visual association functioned, in a way, as the catalyst for everything that I have written in these pages since. It might thus be tempting, at this point, to read Atif's relationships with, and access or non-access to, the different stages of and in her life, by turning to Muñoz's *Stages/stages* and to his future-oriented and always-delayed, always-on-the-horizon, idea of utopian performativity that they materialize: of queerness and utopia as stages, and of the architectural stage of the club as the thing that activates the potential to futurity comprising the heart of utopia itself. Here, however, I want to resist the allure of this epistemological move and close this section on another note, different from Muñozian hope (see also Parla, 2017). I do so, first of all, in what I hope (pun not intended) can be read as a gesture of kindness towards Muñoz himself: that is, in an attempt to return Muñoz to the context that he was speaking of and from with *Cruising Utopia*¹⁵⁹, thus relieving him, for once, of the responsibility of having to be/come relevant to every other else-where and else-when possible, in queer academy and beyond¹⁶⁰. Relatedly – and, again I hope, more relevantly for the purposes of this thesis – I put on this act of conscious theoretical refusal exactly because I identify in Muñoz's *Stages/stages* a fundamental inability to make sense of the

¹⁵⁹ I am aware of the irony of consigning him back to a specific place in space and time when he is advocating for a not-yet-here, for a futurity that always lies lingering on the horizon, but I still deem it a necessary operation nonetheless.

¹⁶⁰ I reiterate my thanks to those among the participants of the workshop 'Queer Utopia: Imagining Future without Borders' (Athens, 27-28 November, 2024) who took the time to share with me feedback and ideas on the incipient draft of this section of the thesis, challenging me to look beyond and against Muñoz much more than I was trying to do.

peculiar convergence that informs the context(s) of this research: in this case, the one resulting from the encounter between Atif (her body, her dance styles, her tastes and aesthetics) and Rome (one of its queer bars, its lgbt+ associationism, its streets, its machinery of migration management), through migration, which is, no doubt, a profoundly different convergence from the scenes that Muñoz himself describes and evokes¹⁶¹.

First of all, however banal this statement might sound, Muñoz's identification of the utopian, futurity-oriented, and community-enabling powers of performance and of its location par excellence – the stage – emerges out of a context where something like a 'Latino gay bar' with a stage can exist in the first place. This is simply yet eloquently pointed out in *Cruising Utopia* itself, as the following quotation contained within it, although speaking to yet another time and place, testifies to: "There was, of course, nothing spectacular about Cleveland's gay male bars in the forties, but the point is simply this: they existed" (Kelsey, 1994, p. 146, quoted in Muñoz, 2019, p. 105). As profusely argued in the previous pages, a similar physical and architectural space does not exist for Atif in Rome today – incidentally, as admitted by Kareem Khubchandani (2020), it would barely exist in middle-class South Asia and in some of its historically more consolidated diasporas, too. If anything, Atif's case shows what can happen, instead, for subjects whose hyper-accentuation along specific lines of class and gender-defiance makes them unintelligible even among those audiences of "minority subjects" (Muñoz, 1999) that utopian performativity is supposed to interpellate and bring together. In a way, it goes as far as to show how devoid of meaning the idea of a minority subject itself can become, when placed within the context of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) that Atif's act of 'she-male' migration from Pakistan to Rome both locates itself into, and further enhances. One thing is the emptiness exuding anticipation when a performance is about to happen, or, even, the emptiness which lingers in the air after a performance has ended (e.g., the one depicted by McCarthy's photos); another thing is the emptiness that accompanies the total overlooking and/or the denial of performance tout court (e.g., the one looming large on Atif's experiences and desires in the Pigneto queer bar).

The second, fundamental juncture where I deem Muñozian thinking unfit to speak to the case of Atif – as well as, potentially, to those of others who might share with Atif more or less similar experiences of life in migration – is the idea of utopian performativity in and of itself, and its resting on futurity, "something that is not quite here" (p. 7), as its enabling horizon. It is when tending to the materiality of life in migration that the shortcomings of the concept most evidently emerge. And not of life in migration to, and in, an unspecified no-matter-where; precisely, of life in migration to, and in, 2020s Italy and Southern Europe more broadly (see e.g., King and DeBono, 2013; King, Lazaridis

¹⁶¹ In a way, I make this move also to partially retrieve myself from the burden of North American Theory (with capital T): from the burden of having to understand it and apply it and quote it confidently, wherever and whenever expected.

and Tsardanidis, 2000; see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.). Interestingly enough, both of Atif's dance performances documented here take place during parentheses of waiting – on that specific day, of waiting for an appointment with the volunteers of the lgbt+ association who had been following Atif's case since the beginning of her asylum journey in Rome. These two are not, however, isolated cases: Atif's beautification rituals and more or less planned performances of she-maleness, in fact, frequently occupy the waiting-rooms and -times that Italian migration and asylum bureaucracy infuse her life with, and that pervasively mark the ordinary (non) passing of time for many others of Italy's migrants, too (see e.g., AIDA, 2023; Chattopadhyay and Tyner, 2020; Danisi et al., 2021). As famously argued by Pierre Bourdieu (2000, p. 228) in an often-cited passage, “[m]aking people wait [...] is an integral part of the exercise of power” (Jacobsen, 2021; Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021). It is exactly as such that waiting, together with temporality and temporalizing techniques more broadly, has become a central theme in contemporary border and migration studies (Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021; see, e.g., Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), ultimately being theorized as a profoundly ambivalent, but nonetheless instrumental tool to the workings of migration management itself. Moreover, as cogently argued by Lorenzo Vianelli, Nick Gill and Nicole Hoellerer (2021), the problem associated with migrants' waiting today is not exclusively one of idleness anymore, i.e., of being forced to wait patiently (McNevin and Missbach, 2018, pp. 27-28, quoted in Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021); but is increasingly becoming one of proving fit enough to wait productively, i.e., of succeeding to use one's own waiting-time to work towards fulfilling the requirements and expectations of ‘integration’¹⁶². Only those who manage to do so can hope to be recognized as deserving of the things they want and need: international protection, documents, housing, a job, and an overall ‘better life’ than the one they left behind. In other words, across the workings of the European machine of migration management, “waiting represents a temporal governing mechanism even when spent productively” (Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021, p. 1016). Migrants and asylum claimants in Italy are fully entrenched in this insidious exercise of power, faced as they become with endless timespans of waiting – and queueing, and shifting from office to office, and from place to place, and often being denied access by place after place –, as well as with expectations of productivity, of being ‘project-oriented’ (*progettuali*) (fieldnotes, 05/24), even while spending long, hardly-quantifiable

¹⁶² Lorenzo Vianelli, Nick Gill and Nicole Hoellerer (2021) advance this argument with specific reference to the waiting time of asylum appeal processes, that is, to the case of asylum seekers whose first application outcome is the denial, rather than the granting, of international protection. Here, however, I am taking the freedom to expand the scope of application of their reflections to all the multiple waiting times that recognized refugees, too, have to endure, not only before the recognition of the status, but also in the aftermath of the positive outcome of their application: waiting for documents, waiting for relocation in secondary reception, waiting for a course or a job, etc.

waiting times in more or less cramped and hostile reception facilities (see e.g., Pinelli, 2014) (see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.2.)¹⁶³.

Coming back to Muñoz and his theorizations of queer utopia and futurity, what I thus want to ask here is the following: when a person's life is governed through, and made to be built around, waiting; when it involves a constant tending towards things that get systematically delayed, and promises that get hardly fulfilled, often no matter how actively and 'productively' one strives towards them – it can be one's own asylum application, documents, housing, job, overall 'integration', even; but also one's desire for romance, companionship, and intimacy –, can utopia really reside in this ever-delayed horizon of futurity that Muñoz (2019) invokes and seems to find so poetically productive? Is utopia even the horizon that one should be tending to, theoretically and ethnographically, here? Isn't it perhaps presentness itself – the thing that does manage to happen; the acting for acting's sake; the here and now of perhaps-not-so-queer present, rather than the there and then of queer futurity – to hold the most relevant potential of all, i.e., the potential that, albeit paradoxically, is not potentiality anymore but has become, instead, actuality, acts in and of themselves? And Atif does act indeed. She dances, quite literally wherever; she scrupulously beautifies herself, not too much, not too little; she posts her aesthetically-coded gestures on social media, profusely and with an agenda; through her social media presence, she then interacts with gurus, and chelas, and other fellow 'she-males', be they in Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia, or someplace else in Europe; she even travels to gather with these same people that her online moves contribute to put her in touch with. In other words, in the waiting time between one appointment and another, between one step of migratory bureaucracy and the next, in the time spent inside the literal "waiting rooms of wanting things" (Chu, 2018, p. 61) that Atif's life in migration is so profusely filled with, Atif occupies the waiting with doing, and, by doing what she wants to do – right here, right now, outside the logics and expectations of migrants' *progettualità* – she stages whatever the opposite of utopia is: not dystopia, but rather a *tópos* – a place, an act, an emplaced act – that exists, presently, and whose value resides in presentness itself. Ultimately, I believe, this lens is the one that gets the closest to do justice to the unraveling of most of Atif's gestures, as I got to grasp them throughout this research and beyond it. What I thus suggest should be looked at the most attentively here is not so much, or not only, what lingers before or after a performance, on a stage whose

¹⁶³ The following reflections by Lea Müller-Funk, Ayşen Üstübcici, and Milena Belloni (2023, p. 3820) can be useful to further contextualize my arguments: "Displaced people are expected to be resilient and self-sufficient by actively responding to humanitarian interventions in their current place of residency once they have been awarded refugee status. Aspirations to improve one's life are, thus, encouraged– but only by if people stay put or migration is not autonomously realised (Nyers 2015). Displaced people are, then, expected to respond positively to humanitarian interventions but not aspire to move on. In other words, it is desirable for displaced people to have life aspirations to becoming self-sufficient and no longer dependent on protection– but these aspirations have to be realised where they currently reside. Having migration aspirations is somehow seen as mostly illegitimate, as actively combatted by policies seeking to counter secondary movements, conclude third-country cooperation agreements and to establish externalisation mechanisms".

emptiness stands to signify a utopia that, with its ever-delayed, always on-the-horizon lingering quality, seems to hold for Atif no attractive promise at all. But rather, the performance that happens, while it happens, wherever it happens, all the times that it happens – and if it gets recorded and posted on TikTok, it can go on happening potentially on a loop –, and exactly because it happens¹⁶⁴. As discussed earlier, in fact, even something as brutally material as the denial of performance itself can work only temporarily as a heuristic to make sense of Atif’s dancing and non-dancing moves in migration: soon, much sooner than one might expect, the ripples of denial wear out and performances start to happen again – they were happening already, in fact, in and out other stages, all over.

¹⁶⁴ By that, I am not suggesting that hope and idealized promises of futurity do not play a role in Atif’s and other participants’ lives. They do, and structurally so, as several interventions in migration studies have also shown (see, e.g., Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019; for a critical formulation of the concept of “precarious hope”, see, instead, Parla, 2017). The contested relationships between hope, optimism, ideations of futurity, on the one hand, and opposite feelings of disappointment and regret, on the other, will be object of deeper, further reflection in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER THREE: WALKING

3.1. Introduction. Walking, Stopping, Then Walking Again

Chapter Two started off from the simple yet crucial observation that transnational migration – i.e., movement of bodies across borders and over often incredibly vast distances – has to necessarily be seen as also implying a whole other set of movements, which, although happening all the time alongside migration itself, get usually ignored by the discipline of migration studies, perhaps because they might look miniscule, if not entirely negligible, at first glance: i.e., movements happening *in* and *through* the body – the ‘queer’ body all the more so¹⁶⁵ – in the form of more or less voluntary gestures, bodily postures, gait styles, or even dance moves. My argument, there, was that, especially in the case of sexual migrations (Carrillo 2017; see also further on in this thesis, Chapter Four, Section 4.2.1.), such small and apparently inconsequential bodily mobilities – whether encouraged or inhibited, performed or imagined – deserve more academic attention than they have typically been afforded, as they come to constitute some of the densest sites for ‘queerness’ to assemble, develop, express itself, get clocked and/or recognized, sanctioned and/or hindered, transnationally, all throughout migration itself. And even more crucially so, via both discursive and material modalities that are not at all isolated from migration and the structures designated for its management, but that are rather constantly shaped by migration itself, while also shaping it back in turn (see e.g., Cantú, 2009; Mole, 2021).

Before moving on to the thorough apprehension of the multiple layers of sexual/queer migration that these preliminary conclusions urgently call for, here in Chapter Three I want to make one more stop halfway, and focus on yet another scale of movement, intermediate between the smallest one of intra-bodily gestures analyzed in Chapter Two: Gesturing, and the broadest one of transnational sexual migration that will be at the heart of Chapter Four: Migrating. I am referring this time to those movements *of* migrant bodies *in space*, which happen along a more reduced scale than the one implied by the broader arc of migration itself – more specifically, after such arc is deemed ‘completed’ –, and which comprise, for instance, further subsets of participants’ internal mobility; their moves out of the reception system and its structures; more strictly discursive moves out, or against, categories of migration management themselves; but also, participants’ everyday movements inside their new Italian hometowns: their mostly walking urban trajectories, and the stops that they intersperse them with.

¹⁶⁵ Not because the queer body inherently moves ‘more’ or ‘more meaningfully’ than other normatively-coded bodies; but, rather, because straight gestures can have the privilege to pass as ‘normal’ – as ‘non-gestures’ in the first place, in a way – and thus go completely unnoticed, while queer gestures are made to acquire very specific set of meanings by virtue of their own ‘queerness’: meanings which often become, coterminously, sites of internal recognition, as much as of violence and oppression. Moreover, both gestures and the meanings attributed to them, can significantly change and shift in and through migration. For a more thorough apprehension of these and other related issues, see Chapter Two: Gesturing.

Not too dissimilarly from what already seen in the case of bodily gestures, this intermediate scale, too, has mostly been sidelined within the mainstream of migration studies. Due to a widespread tendency in the discipline to slip into what has been theorized as “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; see also Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013), migration studies have traditionally approached migration as a discrete event, narrowly defined, in both space and time, as the movement from one nation-state entity to another – be it ‘voluntary’ or forced movement, be it driven by economic, political, social, or environmental factors, or by a combination of two or more of those. Although the coexistence of transnational migration with flows of internal mobility has been academically acknowledged since the 1990s, migration research has nonetheless tended to almost exclusively focus on the former, while bluntly overlooking the latter (King and Skeldon, 2010; Salazar, 2019). As many interventions in the field have by now come to highlight, however, migration cannot be reduced to a discrete event, and should rather be apprehended as an ongoing process, which does not stop once people arrive at their ‘destination’ (in this case: Italy), settle down, and manage to obtain their much-coveted documents and residence permits (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021; Fontanari, 2019; Schuster, 2005). In the words of anthropologist Elena Fontanari (2019, p. 2), migration rather constitutes “a long, everyday struggle”, which takes place and unravels not only across, but – crucially – also *within* national and/or European borders, and through moves often much less spectacularized than the dangerous land and sea-crossings that fill up the Italian, and more broadly European, collective imagination of what migrations from the ‘Global South’ look like (see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021; Sanò and Della Puppa, 2021). Abruptly exiting the asylum reception system and disappearing ‘on holiday’ somewhere in Europe; changing town to start over after a failed relationship; taking discursive and material distance from the ‘refugee’ label; walking every day to the same café, or carefully alternating visits to two different neighboring fast-food restaurants; taking long walks away from the reception center, in the wooded area at the outskirts of town; engaging in consciously theatrical sessions of window-shopping sprees in the city’s main station: these are only some of the moving and/or emplaced actions that have been occurring in the aftermaths of my interlocutors’ settlement in Italy – this latter, in turn, achieved mostly via the SOGI asylum apparatus (see Danisi et al., 2021) – and that I have found myself witnessing throughout the conduction of research. Albeit apparently small and limited in scope, these are all actions that, if looked at up-close, can instead open up meaningful windows into dynamics of (sexual) migration, which cannot be exhausted by and in ‘arrival’ itself: windows into the structural workings and flaws of the Italian reception system, first of all, but also into migrants’ layered emotional, social, and sexual worlds, as they get activated through peculiar relations to place and movement (see Anderson, 2004; Sand, Skovbjerg, and Tanggaard, 2022).

Some of the movements listed above have also directly ended up involving me – in my role as ethnographer of my interlocutors’ im/mobile lives – as both co-participant in, and facilitator of, those movements in and of themselves. Often, my own tapping into place and movement, as well as into my interlocutors’ relation to both, was exactly what allowed me into additional layers of their life-stories (Eastmond, 1996, p. 235), which got activated exactly through mobility and/in place, rather than via narrative alone (see also Chapter One, Section 1.3.). In other words, not only was internal im/mobility – in the form of further internal relocation, exit from the reception system, but also of simply walking somewhere or aimlessly roaming around – a central theme for the present research, integral to the development itself of the conception of (sexual) migration and im/mobility that I am espousing throughout this work; but it has also functioned as a methodological tool that I have more or less consciously found myself activating, in order to conduct significant components of the present ethnography. If, on the one hand, none of my interlocutors stopped engaging in different scales and regimes of often-contested im/mobility once their settlement in Italy from South Asia was completed; on the other, some of these smaller-scale movements in and of themselves also turned out to be an essential methodological counterpart to what started off as a primarily narrative-based research into life-stories of queerness and/in migration, but that a conscious attention to place, movement, and emplaced movement allowed to develop in new, unexpected directions.

For all of these reasons, throughout Chapter Three I will keep my attention tuned to this more comprehensive, yet at the same time also more subjectivized, conception of im/mobilities, rather than to migration ‘proper’ alone. And I will do so, by focusing on participants’ engagement with sets of movements that happen *after* the ‘completion’ of their primary relocation journeys, from South Asia to Italy. As anticipated above, I will look at this intermediate scale of im/mobility – one that I am subsuming under the simplified pair of ‘walking/stopping’, but that actually involves a much vaster range of movements and non-movements, both spatial and discursive in nature – under two different, albeit related perspectives: first of all, as an additional research theme; and secondly, as a methodological tool for the conduction of research in the first place. Indeed, in developing this chapter, my ultimate aim will be exactly to highlight the double-edged nature of these im/mobilities, as both *themes* and *methods* of research itself. The chapter will be thus articulated in two macro-sections, respectively devoted to the former (Section 3.2.: Im/mobility as Theme) and the latter (Section 3.3.: Im/mobility as Method). Each one of the two will be further articulated, in turn, in smaller subsections, where participants and researcher’s experiences of movement and non-movement will be discussed against the theoretical and methodological backgrounds of mobility and critical migration studies, mobile methodologies, as well as geographic theorizations of space and movement, and their relation to participant’s emotions, memories, and narratives. Contrary to what already happened in

Chapter Two and to what will happen in Chapter Four – where the ethnographic focus was, and will be, mostly led by an individual engagement with one single participant’s life-story at a time – here, the narratives and experiences of my interlocutors will percolate in a slightly more scattered way, throughout a discussion that will be theoretical and methodological, as much as it will be ethnographic.

3.2. Im/mobility as Theme: Moving, After Migration

In framing my discussion of intermediate im/mobilities – intermediate between the bodily movement of ‘gesturing’ (see Chapter Two) and the transnational movement of ‘migrating’ (see Chapter Four) – as a theme for research, I want to focus, first of all, on further subsets of internal movement, which happen once my interlocutors’ main arc of migration appears completed: that is, once they reach the Italian territory at the end of long, often-perilous journeys across more or less dangerous land and sea borders (from Pakistan, to the Gulf, through Libya, to Lampedusa, for instance; or from Bangladesh, to Eastern Europe, through the Balkans, to Italy), and begin to settle in the Italian territory. More specifically, I want to inaugurate the discussion by first drawing attention to a specific and deemed-unexpected set of movements, enacted by people who have managed to obtain the much sought-after recognition of refugee status – in the specific case of this research, on SOGI grounds – and are thus expected to be less prone to engage in further subsets of migration (see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). I am referring specifically to the often unseen and unforeseen movements of refugees *out* of the reception system: the exit moves, in other words, enacted by people who decide to more or less abruptly abandon the same reception infrastructures that, at least on paper, are put into place to guarantee the protection of their ‘vulnerabilities’, and the promotion of their ‘integration’ and ‘inclusion’ into the Italian social fabric. As the ensuing discussion will show, the analysis of this first, strictly spatial set of post-migration mobilities will function, in turn, as the bridge from which to develop a broader reflection on another kind of ‘exits’, this time more discursive than geographic in nature. I am referring here to refugees’ moving away from, and/or stretching out from within of, the discursive confines of the realm of refugeeness in and of itself: the moral-political grounds that make it up, the numerous expectations that it raises at both a policy-related, and more broadly social level, as well as their inherent limitations. As the following ethnography- and policy-based discussion will attempt to show, albeit happening on two distinct grounds, these sets of movements – out and against reception infrastructures, and out and against refugeeness – are not at all isolated: they feed off each other, both materially and discursively. Against this background, I want to inaugurate the discussion with a new ethnographic vignette: one that involves Atif, and her abrupt decision to abandon her spot within Italy’s system for the secondary reception of refugees.

Field Diary Excerpt

July 30, 2024. Evening.

I'm lying in my hostel bed, resting and mindlessly scrolling my phone after a long and intense day of fieldwork, when I get a vocal message from Anna¹⁶⁶. She is not contacting me for a mediation, she reassures me: those will resume again in September. In fact, she hopes that I am already on holiday. She wants to talk to me about Atif. She wants to know if I've spoken to him¹⁶⁷ recently, because it seems that he has left his [SAI] camp in Rome, went to Bologna, and told the camp social workers that he is staying there with some friends and will not be coming back. They are thus proceeding to signal his abandonment (lit. '*rinuncia*') of his spot in the project, as well as his definitive exit from the SAI system. The *Sistema Accoglienza Integrazione* (SAI) works via a shared national basis, Anna reminds me, and this means that, at least for a certain period of time, Atif will not be allowed into any other SAI facility, anywhere in Italy. It is not like he is leaving Rome now, but will nonetheless be able to get hosted by another project in Bologna: Anna wants to make sure that he knows this. She is thus inquiring on whether he has told me anything about this decision, not at all because she wants to dissuade him from leaving or control him, but mostly to make sure that Atif is aware of what exiting the SAI network entails: she wants to make sure, in other words, that there hasn't been any misunderstandings between Atif and the camp social workers on this crucial aspect, and that he is knowingly making this move.

The contents of Anna's message catch me entirely off-guard. Atif hasn't told me anything about any of this: Bologna, leaving the camp, exiting the reception system for good – I am clueless. Sure, he had made manifest to me his uneasiness towards his living conditions in the camp several times before, but I had not realized that he could make the decision to leave. The last time we had met, he had hinted at his frustration about his campmates' constant harassment against him, and at an apparently vague project to go away, but – as naively as it may sound – I could not fathom that he would actually do it. On that occasion, I had tried to dissuade him from the plan – why didn't he try to resist and enroll in the tailoring course that was being offered there? It could open up employment opportunities for him!¹⁶⁸ –, but it was clear now that my attempts had not worked. All throughout her

¹⁶⁶ When the events referred to here occur, I am out of town to meet with two research participants who, contrary to Atif, do not reside in Rome.

¹⁶⁷ At the time, Atif would refer to herself by employing mostly the masculine form of verbs and adjectives in Urdu, hence the male pronouns here in this fieldwork diary excerpt. This tendency has been shifting consistently with time, so much so that, at the time of writing, Atif almost exclusively employs the feminine forms, at least when talking to me. In the discussion, I will thus prefer the latter.

¹⁶⁸ As I will explore further on in this section, within the SAI network guests are accompanied towards their entrance in the job market via professionalizing courses, relative to different employment sectors (hospitality, food, disparate sets of manual labor, etc.).

message, Anna stresses that the final decision must be Atif's, and Atif's alone: she wishes him all the best in Bologna with his friends, and only hopes that he knows what he's doing. There isn't much we can do if his desire truly is to leave. I immediately reply to the message and confess my surprise to her. The last time Atif and I saw each other, he had even told me that he had finally managed to get an interview for the tailoring course, which was supposed to start soon – incredibly good news, considering that he had spent the previous six months in the camp in almost complete idleness. Not only did he manage to get that course interview, Anna adds, but he was also being booked for a series of additional meetings mired at organizing his relocation to another reception facility, following his complaints against the dire treatment that he was being subjected to by his fellow campmates because of his sexuality and gender non-conformity. And yet, after conducting a first interview for the transfer, exactly when things were starting to fall into place for him to move, Atif did not show up at his follow-up interview – which sure enough did not depose in his favor, Anna admits. The next thing we know, he had exited the reception system and left Rome for Bologna, following what, in the confusion of the moment, seems to me like a drastic, definitive, and, in all honesty, quite unreasonable decision.

—

Academic literature on South-North migratory flows has been for long characterized by a consistent disregard of the fact that the 'completion' of a migration project does not entail, at the same time, the end of mobility tout court for migrants (see Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, 1995, on the concept of the 'transmigrant'; see also e.g., Della Puppa and King, 2018; Fontanari, 2019; King, 2002). As Atif's experience begins to illuminate – but hers was certainly not an isolated case in this research – once people 'settle' in the European country that they 'end up' into (Italy, in this case)¹⁶⁹, not only do they keep on moving daily in their lives – and often, though obviously not exclusively, for reasons very much related to their migratory status itself: to go looking for jobs, visit offices, show up at their *Questura* appointments, and more (see also further on in this chapter, Section 3.3.). But they also frequently engage in further subsets of internal migration, which, in the case of refugees like Atif, can turn out to be so drastic as to entail people's loss of their right to *accoglienza* (lit. 'reception') tout court, as well as the erosion of their own refugeeeness: that is to say, not so much of their refugee status in and of itself, as of the expectations that make up the moral-discursive grounds

¹⁶⁹ This 'ending up' is especially true in the case of Italy. Given the peculiar combination of Italy's geographic positioning as an outpost within the Mediterranean basin, with Dublin Regulation's first country rule, many asylum claimants reach Italy 'by chance' to then find themselves forced to remain, at least for the initial stages of their migration trajectories. In fact, in many cases, Italy – and Southern European countries more broadly – is not people's first choice when it comes to imagining a new life in Europe. Other destinations, such as Germany and France, are much more popular and sought-after.

upon which the subjectivity of the refugee is constructed at the policy- and reception-level, and which include, but are not limited to, vulnerability (see e.g., Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023; Ticktin, 2011), passivity (see e.g., Kallio, Häkli and Pascucci, 2019), deservingness (see e.g., Marchetti, 2020), gratitude (see e.g., Buxton and Gibney, 2025), as well as – as paradoxical as it may sound – self-reliance, resilience (Krause and Schmidt, 2020), and entrepreneurship (Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021). As I will argue throughout this section, however, the drastic nature of such moves is less dependent on the moves in and of themselves, than on the structures within which they happen: on the workings of the Italian machinery for the reception of asylum claimants, refugees, and migrants, as well as, relatedly, on the moral and political discursive regimes that each of these categories rests upon.

Indeed, further levels of internal mobility post-migration are not at all unheard of in a context fully entrenched in the Mediterranean model of migration like the Italian one, with its reliance on informal labor markets, and its complex interplays of incoming, internal, and outgoing flows of work-related mobility (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021, pp. 506-508; see also Ambrosini, 2018; Colucci, 2018; King, 1993; King and Black, 1997). Against this backdrop of social and economic precarity, it is common for Italy-based migrants to experience meaningful subsets of internal movement, often by circling back and forth between northern and southern regions, agricultural and industrial areas, or smaller and bigger towns, following employment opportunities (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021); but also, to engage in intra-European trajectories of mobility, whereby migrants travel back and forth between (see e.g. Fontanari, 2019), or simply onwards to (see e.g., Della Puppa and King, 2018), other European destinations deemed more appealing than Italy itself. The most widespread tendency in scholarship has been to explore such secondary subsets of intra-national and intra-European mobility in relation to native populations and so-called ‘economic’ migrants, but asylum claimants and refugees, too, fully participate in them – and notwithstanding their characterization, by policy and scholarship alike, as the most ‘immobile’ migrants of the lot (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). This perceived immobility must be understood, in turn, against both the legal-moral background through which the category itself of the refugee has come into being and is currently being sustained within humanitarian reasoning and international law (see Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Malkki, 1996; Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023, pp. 3819-3821), as well as the specificities of Italy’s system of *accoglienza*, which with the latter communicates. Both of these rely, in fact, on a foregrounding of refugees’ exceptionalism and vulnerability, which makes it discursively hard, if not straight-up impossible, to envision the possibility for refugees themselves to have inclinations and desires that slip away from the rigid discursive cages of escape, survival, and passivity – as well as, coterminously, integration-oriented entrepreneurship – framing their very right to exist within the borders of Europe (Müller-Funk,

Üstübici and Belloni, 2023). Inclinations and desires that, moreover, may even stretch beyond the boundaries of reception itself (ibid.), as Atif's case will contribute to illustrate. Against this background, then, before turning to a more detailed examination of such desire-driven forms of border crossing, it is first necessary to outline the main features of those same borders that are initially put into place to constrain them. In the specific case of this research, those of Italy's reception system: a system conceived and structured as to specifically accommodate asylum claimants and refugees, rather than the otherwise unspecified totality of 'migrants' tout court.

3.2.1. Italy's *Accoglienza*: A Brief Overview

In the current climate of increasing securitization, border-externalization practices, and overall hostility towards migrations that pervades Italy (see e.g., AIDA, 2023; 2024; 2025; Colucci, 2018), being recognized as a refugee has come to amount to one of the few, if not virtually the only, legal/izable route left for migrants to break into fortress Europe via Italian borders (Sciurba, 2018; Sorgoni, 2022) – a long, arduous, and exhausting route nonetheless (Sciurba, 2018). Italy's entire system of *accoglienza* is indeed built around the figure of the 'authentic' refugee – and, to a far lesser extent, of the asylum claimant – with the ultimate aim, however, of producing her alleged 'integration' into the Italian social and cultural fabric, more than of reaching a genuine understanding and accommodation of her individual trajectory of life, in, before, and after migration. The Italian term *accoglienza* itself – commonly used by policymakers, media, and publics alike – designates the formal system established for the management and, indeed, the reception, specifically of those migrants who lodge an application for international protection in Italy. Upon arrival at the Italian border, migrants are in fact confronted with a sharply differentiated legal landscape, which hinges on whether they invoke the right to apply for asylum or not. Expression of this will/need determines access to the asylum procedure and, crucially, to the formal reception system itself (i.e., *accoglienza*)¹⁷⁰. By contrast, those who do not apply for international protection and lack the legal requirements for entry are subjected to refusal of access or removal measures (Sciurba, 2018)¹⁷¹. Legal pathways for so-called 'economic' migrants do, in fact, exist in Italy, but are governed via a distinct, highly regulated mechanism, which falls within the purview of *decreti flussi* (lit. 'flows decrees'): an annual system of quotas, regulating the entry of non-EU nationals for employment purposes on the basis of labor market needs (Palumbo and Marchetti, 2024; see also Ministero dell'Interno, n.a.b). Access to this

¹⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of the problematic nature of such procedures, especially when carried out at Italy's hotspots, see Sciurba, 2018.

¹⁷¹ For a succinct but complete description of the whole process of migration/travel to Italy for non-EU national, from entrance to settling, but also to get a glimpse of how the process itself was described and presented to migrants by Italian authorities, see e.g., *The Handbook for Integration*, issued by the Ministry of Labor in 2009.

channel is thus limited and contingent upon stringent conditions, which include prior authorization, an employer's sponsorship, and the issuance of a work visa, making this employer-based mobility path structurally unavailable to individuals who arrive 'irregularly' at Italy's land- or sea-frontiers (Palumbo and Marchetti, 2024). As a result, Italy's migration governance operates through a clear functional separation between protection-oriented entry routes, which are supposed to activate reception and welfare infrastructures, and labor-migration channels, which, at least on paper, are planned beforehand and remain largely disconnected from reception policies. This separation contributes to the construction of asylum claimants and refugees as the primary, if not the sole, legitimate protagonists and recipients of *accoglienza*, while positioning other migrants outside the scope of reception tout court: as subjects to be managed, that is, through border-control measures, detention and return procedures, or extremely selective labor admission schemes¹⁷². And yet, such a primacy of the refugee, materializing as it does mostly through her abiding relationality to reception policies, also comes at a high discursive and material cost for the refugee herself – a cost that the opening ethnographic vignette begins to reveal, and that ensuing sections of this chapter will proceed to unpack further. Starting from these premises, briefly delving into the main technicalities of Italy's *accoglienza*, as they developed throughout the last three decades, will provide the necessary context to the ensuing discussion, as well as the basis starting from which to analyze the discursive and material consequences of such a setting.

In Italy, the right to asylum is guaranteed already at the constitutional level, with article 10 (3) stating that “[t]he foreigner who, in her own country, is prevented from effectively exercising the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian Constitution has the right to asylum on the territory of the Republic, in accordance with the conditions established by the law” (my translation). Moreover, and like all European countries, Italy is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and to its 1967 Protocol, as well as part of the CEAS, the Common European Asylum System (Danisi et al., 2021). Most of Italy's legal dispositions for the reception of asylum claimants and refugees started to develop progressively from the 1990s, when the country made its first official moves into a more markedly European framework for the planning and management of migration policies at the communitarian level (Colucci, 2018, p. 89). It was, in fact, only in 1990 that

¹⁷² The reality, however, is often quite different, as *decreti flussi* are increasingly being treated as if they were *sanatorie*: i.e., ex-post regularization schemes for people already living and working on the Italian territory, rather than as channels for regular entry. As Palumbo and Marchetti (2024, p.18) explain: “[T]he Flows Decree system involves a lengthy and convoluted bureaucratic procedure, based on the (false) assumption that prospective migrant workers remain in their home countries until the entry visa is issued, and thus are not in Italy before that (Ambrosini 2013). This mechanism of long-distance matching between job demand and supply hinders effective and transparent procedures (Chiaromonte and Federico 2021). Instead, it fosters the circumvention of the Flows Decree regulation, for there is often an ‘agreement’ between an employer and an irregular migrant worker already present in Italy that the latter will return to their country of origin until they obtain an entry visa. In this context, the Flows Decree system works as a sort of ‘ex-post regularisation’¹⁰ (Sciarra and Chiaromonte 2014).”

the Martelli Law (Law no. 39/1990) abolished the geographical reservation for asylum claimants initially envisioned by the Geneva Convention, opening up the right for people to lodge an application for international protection in Italy regardless of their country of provenance (p. 86)¹⁷³. It was again in 1990 that Italy ratified the Dublin Convention, a provision aimed at harmonizing European asylum policies, which mandates that asylum claimants lodge their applications in the European country of first entry – something destined to yield a huge impact on Italy’s strategies for, and infrastructures of, migration management in the years to come, given the country’s peculiar geographic positioning in the Mediterranean basin¹⁷⁴ (p. 90). As of today, the primary legal framework for asylum in Italy is constituted by Legislative Decree no. 251/2007, which, by implementing EU Directive 2004/83/EC, establishes the minimum standards for granting refugee status and subsidiary protection to third-country nationals, and defines the scope and content of each available form of protection (Danisi et al., 2021, p. 106). The frequent, substantial changes that have been affecting Italian migration law over the years, however, also impacted several key provisions for the reception of refugees and asylum claimants (ibid.), which are worth revisiting here.

From the late 1990s onwards, Italy’s migration regime began to undergo significant transformations. Earlier phases of migration governance had been marked by a structurally fragmented system, heavily reliant on ex-post regularization campaigns (so-called ‘*sanatorie*’), and weakly institutionalized entry channels. Within this framework, international protection only played a marginal role, both in quantitative terms and as an organizing principle of migration policy, with asylum procedures remaining underdeveloped, and recognition rates staying consistently low (Colucci, 2018). Policy attention was instead largely oriented towards labor migration, recurrent regularizations, and rights-based channels for entry such as family reunification. Against this background, and in a context of changing migration patterns and increasing arrivals, initially from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and later on also from African and Asian countries, Italy’s migration policies progressively shifted towards more restrictive and security-oriented approaches (Colucci, 2018). This reorientation, closely intertwined with broader political changes occurring also at the governmental level, contributed to an increase in the centrality of asylum and border-control procedures within Italian migration governance. This process reached its peak in the mid-2010s, during what got widely framed, in both public and political discourses, as Europe’s ‘refugee crisis’: a label that, albeit highly contested in scholarly

¹⁷³ The 1951 Geneva Convention originally limited the definition of refugee to people displaced because of events occurring before 1 January 1951, and in Europe only. This geographical limitation reflected the Convention’s historical focus on the post-World War II forms of displacement characterizing the European context, and the reluctance of states to assume open-ended protection obligations beyond that specific context. At the level of international law, the limitation was removed by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which universalized the scope of the refugee definition.

¹⁷⁴ The Dublin Regulation came into force seven years later, in 1997.

literature (see e.g., Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Marchetti, 2020), proved influential in legitimizing the further tightening of migration policies, as well as the expansion of exceptional measures for migrants' reception and border control. At the time of the alleged 'crisis', the reception of asylum claimants and refugees in Italy was being articulated through two distinct but communicating channels: the SPRAR (*Sistema di Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*)¹⁷⁵ and the CARA (*Centri di Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo*), respectively constituting the more structured, and the emergency-led level of *accoglienza* (Colucci, 2018). Centered on the notion of integrated reception determined under Law No. 328/2000, the system was one aiming to provide support services to help migrants regain their autonomy (Milani, 2025) – a feature that, at least on paper, and notwithstanding the substantial changes that migration policies have since gone through, it still retains to this day. Its declared objective was – and, to a lesser extent, still is – to encourage a “holistic approach [...] aimed at fostering the care of the individual person in their entirety and in their many facets, starting from the identification and enhancement of their individual resources” (ANCI-Min. Int., 2018, p. 7 quoted in Milani, 2025, p. 974). While the system was innovative in this respect, its initial scope was limited¹⁷⁶, and with the outbreak of the 'crisis', Italy found itself entirely unprepared to react to increased numbers in arrivals, both at the policy and the infrastructure levels (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020; Marchetti, 2020). As Chiara Marchetti (2020, p. 241) cogently points out, however, the alleged crisis was one less dependent on arrivals per se, than on Italy's inability – perhaps, unwillingness – to properly confront and accommodate them. Italy's geographic positioning as a strategic outpost within the Mediterranean basin, and the concomitant implementation of Dublin Regulation's first-country rule, only contributed to exacerbate further an already-existing sense of emergency about the dangers of potentially uncontrolled, 'illegal' arrivals in the Italian territory (ibid.) – a moral panic still very much alive to this day. Consequently, the Italian response to these changes in migration patterns crystallized into an emergency-oriented approach to reception, which has since become a permanent feature of the system (Campesi, 2018). An approach which is based, among other things, on border externalization and bilateral agreements with sending and transit countries; on the referring of quick identification and sorting procedures, aimed at the distinction of legitimate asylum claims from 'irregular' arrivals, to hotspots and border police; and on the establishment of Centers for Extraordinary Reception, or CAS (*Centri per l'Accoglienza Straordinaria*), which have by now become the standard of reception within the broader Italian context (Colucci, 2018; Sciurba, 2018).

¹⁷⁵ The System for the Protection of Asylum Claimants and Refugees (SPRAR) was formally instituted in Italy in 2002 by the so-called Bossi-Fini Law (Law no. 189/2002), and stayed into place until 2018, when it was reconstituted as SPRAR (see Colucci, 2018; see also further on in this section).

¹⁷⁶ Suffice it to think, on this regard, that the first monitoring report from 2005 recorded only 81 local projects nationwide, offering a total of 3028 reception places (Censis, 2005 quoted in Milani, 2025).

More recently, the succession of conservative right-wing governments, as well as the residual impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, have done nothing but exacerbate Italy's already-tight migration policies. Among those, the by now infamous *Decreti Sicurezza e Immigrazione* (lit. 'Security and Immigration Decrees', i.e., Law Decree 113/2018 and 59/2019), promoted by the then Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, introduced the most substantial changes to asylum claimants' access and entitlement to reception, including the abolition of humanitarian protection, the exclusion of asylum claimants from the SPRAR, and the formal substitution of the latter with the 'Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors', or SIPROIMI (Marchetti, 2020; Palumbo and Marchetti, 2024). Some of the changes implicated by the decree were later reversed with the adoption of Law No. 173/2020, including the restructuration of the reception system for asylum claimants and refugees through the introduction of the new Reception and Integration System (SAI, *Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione*), which replaced the SIPROIMI, in turn former-SPRAR (ibid.). In 2023, however, some of the 2018 provisions got reinstated again by the so-called *Decreto Cutro* (Law Decree 20/2023, converted into Law no. 50/2023): most notably of all, the exclusion of asylum claimants from the right to access the SAI network – and, consequently, from the possibility to benefit from the additional services provided for by structures of secondary reception –, and their confinement to basic, emergency-driven measures of *prima accoglienza* only¹⁷⁷. What matters the most here is that, taken together, these frequent and often-contradictory changes in Italy's migration policy and law have ultimately resulted in the subtle but pervasive reframing of the figure of the asylum seeker herself as one occupying the positionality of the 'illegal' migrant, *until proven otherwise* (Marchetti, 2020). This one constitutes, in turn, the tip of the iceberg of a broader project to substitute a regime of rights with one of deservingness, as the primary reference point for Italian migration law (ibid.). By requiring individuals to prove to be genuinely deserving of protection before being afforded legal status and a place within the reception system, the adoption of this approach ultimately reverses the logic of protection itself, while also turning the realm of vulnerability into the sole moral-discursive pivot, for claimants, refugees, social workers, and activists alike, to potentially access the system, and/or attempt to hijack it from the inside (see Müller-Funk, Üstübici and Belloni, 2023).

After all the changes in migration policies briefly retraced above, the Italian system of reception retains, today, a two-level structure comprised by a *prima* (first) and a *seconda accoglienza* (secondary reception) (Milani, 2025). The first level of reception begins at Italy's hotspots for those entering

¹⁷⁷ Prior to 2018, i.e., before the abolition of humanitarian protection, 30% of the system beneficiaries were comprised by holders of humanitarian and international protection, both of which could benefit of the services provided by the SPRAR (Marchetti, 2020, p. 242).

by sea¹⁷⁸, and Centers for First Reception (CPA, *Centri di Prima Accoglienza*) strategically located, instead, in border or border-adjacent localities¹⁷⁹. It then continues inside Centers for Extraordinary Reception (CAS, *Centri per l'Accoglienza Straordinaria*), which are more widely distributed across the national territory. Technically set up, at first, as temporary and emergency-only structures designated to host asylum claimants during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, as already anticipated, today CAS actually constitute the standard, most widespread form of reception in Italy¹⁸⁰. Overcrowded facilities operating well beyond their capacity – and, not by chance, invariably referred to as ‘camps’ in migrants’ own parlance –, they constitute limbo zones where asylum claimants are left to wait for their appointments with the Territorial Commissions, but where, more often than not, they end up remaining long after the recognition of their refugee status has occurred. Posited under the central management of the Prefecture and, as of today, operating with increasingly fewer resources, CAS provide their guests with essential support only, limited to housing, meals, healthcare, and linguistic mediation¹⁸¹ (Milani, 2025). The secondary level of reception is constituted, on the other hand, by the SAI network, a nationwide set of facilities and services managed at the local level directly by municipalities, and which – as the name itself already gives away – alongside basic reception measures, provides beneficiaries with a series of additional services aimed at their ‘integration’: employment guidance and vocational training courses, healthcare, social and psychological support, Italian language classes, and legal and territorial orientation services. SAI facilities are, in other words, the places where *accoglienza* proper is supposed to happen, while CAS mostly function as institutions designated to ensure claimants’ containment and control (Marchetti, 2020; see also Pinelli, 2014 for a broader reflection on reception structures as ‘camps’). As already anticipated, following the introduction of Law Decree no. 20/2023, access to the SAI network has been significantly restricted, and is now premised upon stringent conditions: only recognized refugees and a limited range of other claimants considered to be affected by peculiar sets of vulnerabilities – people coming from conflict-affected and high-risk areas, migrants who reach Italy via humanitarian corridors, and vulnerable asylum claimants¹⁸² – can hope to be ‘promoted’ to second-level reception services and facilities (Milani,

¹⁷⁸ At the time of writing, active hotspots are located in Lampedusa (AG), Pozzallo (RG), Messina, and Taranto (Ministero dell’Interno, n.a.a.).

¹⁷⁹ CPAs are currently located in Bari, Brindisi, Isola di Capo Rizzuto (KR), Gradisca d’Isonzo (GO), Udine, Manfredonia (FG), Caltanissetta, Messina, Treviso (Ministero dell’Interno, n.a.a.).

¹⁸⁰ <https://openmigration.org/glossary-term/centri-di-accoglienza-straordinaria-cas/>

¹⁸¹ As already explained earlier on, psychological assistance, the provision of Italian language courses, and legal and territorial orientation services got removed from the services that must be guaranteed in first-reception facilities, via a further amendment introduced by Decree-Law no. 20/2023, Article 6-ter (Camera dei Deputati, 2024).

¹⁸² Under Legislative Decree No. 142/2015, vulnerable groups include minors, unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, individuals with severe illnesses or mental disorders, and those who have experienced torture, rape, severe violence related to sexual orientation or gender identity, or genital mutilation. The differentiated access to reception services under current legislation, based on the formal recognition of vulnerability, would warrant separate discussion.

2025). The vast majority of claimants is instead confined to cramped CAS, for periods of time that, at least in a city like Rome, almost invariably exceed those envisioned, on paper, by policy measures themselves. Moreover, with the capacity of the SAI network mostly falling short of the actual demand, the latter, too, struggles to accommodate all the people who would qualify for access, with vulnerability de facto becoming the diriment criterion for entrance¹⁸³. Priority access to the limitedly available facilities of secondary reception is thus accorded to those among claimants and refugees who are deemed to be the most affected by particularly vicious sets of ‘fragilities’, with ‘non-normative’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) figuring among them.

Summing up, in the Italian context a first, diriment distinction is enacted at the policy level between ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migrations, and thus between economic migrants and refugees. Only people partaking in transnational mobility because ‘forced’ to do so by dire external circumstances – that is, only ‘vulnerable’ people on the move – can hope to access Italy’s reception network. Voluntary/economic migrants, instead, when not falling within the limited purview of *decreti flussi*, are denied access to the system and illegalized. On the other hand, with migration laws becoming increasingly stricter and, consequently, with international protection remaining virtually the only available path to access *accoglienza* and receive documents (Sciurba, 2018; Sorgoni, 2022), a climate of increased suspicion has gained ground: one in which authorities are constantly on the lookout for ‘bogus refugees’ (see Ferreira, 2022), and where asylum claimants are posited on an equal standing with ‘illegal’ migrants, until proven to be truthfully deserving of protection (Marchetti, 2020). Against this composite backdrop – and without denying the moral value of attempting to accommodate within the system people’s most serious sets of fragilities – such a centrality of the realm of vulnerability is not at all inconsequential, but rather comes at a high discursive and material cost: first of all, for all those people on the move that the criterion implicitly ends up excluding; but, somewhat paradoxically, also for recognized refugees and other ‘vulnerable’ categories of migrants, to whom it explicitly caters. It is exactly to an assessment of these discursive and material slippages produced by the vulnerability rationale – specifically as they unfold throughout Atif’s experiences within and without the reception system – that I now turn.

3.2.2. Leaving *Accoglienza* Behind: Refugees’ Desires Against the Grain

The one retraced above is, summed up, the institutional backdrop against which Atif’s trajectory of mobility, too, gets to unfold: from Pakistan to Libya; from Libya to the Lampedusa hotspot; from

¹⁸³ Despite the increased focus on vulnerability, the Italian system remains largely unprepared to accommodate individuals with specific assistance needs. According to data from June 2024, the SAI network provides 757 places for people with socio-medical or psychological distress, accounting for less than 2% of its total reception capacity (38,367 places nationwide, <https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/I-dati-generalisti-del-SAI-al-30-giugno-2024.pdf>).

the Lampedusa hotspot to a CAS in Rome; from the CAS to a project within the SAI network, again in Rome; and, in an apparently final and rather counterintuitive move, from Rome to Bologna, out of the SAI network, and, consequently, out of the reception system tout court.

As time would soon reveal, and contrary to my own initial impression, Atif's decision to settle in Bologna with her friends turns out not to be final, with her mobility stretching further in both time and space: Bologna is almost immediately followed by an industrial town in Northern Germany, and, a couple of months later, by another industrial town, this time in Northern Italy – the same city where she still lives now, at the time of writing, and out of which she periodically travels to meet with friends and lovers all across Italy and beyond. Atif's exit from the reception system, instead, very much is a definitive one, and notwithstanding all the struggles that she had to previously endure, in order to access the system in the first place. Atif had been officially recognized as a refugee on SOGI grounds in Rome approximately one year prior to the events referred to here. Before that, she had to wait months for her *Commissione Territoriale* appointment, while jostling, in the meantime, everyday life within her 'camp' (i.e., CAS), precarious job opportunities, and ineffective Italian language courses¹⁸⁴. Even after the much-awaited positive outcome of her application, she had to wait almost just as long before being finally transferred from the cramped CAS at the outskirts of Rome, where she had been living since her first arrival in town, to a much smaller and more familiar SAI project, located in a fancy residential area, not far from the city center – a transfer that, however slow, was no doubt facilitated only by Atif's condition of emphasized 'vulnerability' as both a gender-defiant, sexually non-normative individual *and* a refugee (see Danisi et al., 2021)¹⁸⁵. And yet, even though the passage from *prima* to *seconda accoglienza* is one supposed to bring about an improvement in refugees' living conditions – one that ultimately aims at accompanying vulnerable people towards 'autonomy' and 'integration' into the Italian social fabric –, Atif's trajectory contributes to disrupt this ideal narrative, as well as the broader logics upon which it is premised, in meaningful ways.

As the opening field diary excerpt begins to illustrate, and as already mentioned earlier on in this work (see Chapter Two, Section 2.3.), Atif's quality of life and overall wellbeing and satisfaction hardly improve with her entrance into the SAI network. Put to live in a small, all-male facility, not too differently from what would already happen to her within the CAS, she is immediately made the

¹⁸⁴ In Italy, asylum applicants have the right to start working 60 days after lodging their application for international protection. This does not mean, however, that the asylum-seeker permit can be converted into a work or residence permit (AIDA, 2023, p. 159). For a brief but clear discussion on both the possibilities and challenges for asylum claimants and refugees within the Italian job market, see AIDA, 2023, pp. 159-160.

¹⁸⁵ The support provided by The Rainbow Hub's mediation proved crucial all along the way of Atif's migration journey: in speeding up the timeline for Atif's interview with the Territorial Commission, and in backing up her story of sexual migration from Pakistan to Italy as well as of active participation in Italy's LGBT+ spaces of sociality, first of all; but also, later on, in facilitating her transfer to a reputable SAI project, as well as in monitoring Atif's life conditions both within and outside her 'camp'.

target of homo- and transphobic harassment, as well as of unwanted sexual advances by several of her campmates, who easily cloak her as a ‘khusra’ and accuse her of not being worthy enough of being a Muslim because of her gender defiance and non-normative sexual/romantic desires (see Chapter Two, Section 2.3.). Moreover, she soon finds herself disattending the expectations of both *progettualità* (roughly translatable, in this context, as ‘the quality of fruitfully envisioning one’s own life as a linear project’) and *produttività* (lit. ‘productivity’), that the apparatus for the protection and reception of refugees tends to be built around, both in Italy and beyond. In fact, an apparently profound paradigmatic shift within policies for refugees’ protection has been occurring as high as at the international level, and especially as promoted by the UNHCR: one that seemingly sets aside the image of the refugee as a vulnerable victim, to rather embrace her as a capable actor whose self-reliance and resilience¹⁸⁶, more than anything else, protection policies should promote and enhance (Krause and Schmidt, 2020). An approach that can be summed up by the motto: ‘helping refugees to help themselves’ (p. 23). As Ulrike Krause and Hannah Schmidt (2020, p. 35) underline, however, such a shift only apparently contradicts the vulnerability rationale, maintaining the core of international asylum policy – i.e., that the refugee is, and cannot not be, a vulnerable victim – largely intact:

[S]elf-reliance and resilience policies only changed *what* assistance is delivered—refugees previously seemed in need of receiving external help in the form of resources, and now they appear to require external support to reach their own potential. But the *how* stays the same, leaving the perception of refugeehood essentially unaltered: refugees need aid. In effect, the ‘objective’ humanitarian criteria in the policies deny refugees their actor status, as their practices are neglected, and actions that go beyond humanitarian boundaries are likely unwanted or unseen, so that refugees are caught in a category of ‘actors-to-be’.

Confined as they are to their liminal positionality of “actors-to-be” (ibid.), refugees are indeed expected to act, but only as long as their actions remain within the confines of what humanitarian reasoning deems as ‘proper’ actions in the first place: above all, those actions that mire at the obtainment of economic activeness and independence (Krause and Schmidt, 2020). Everything else risks remaining, in contrast, either “unwanted” and thus hindered, or “unseen” and hence ignored (ibid.; see also Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023). Accordingly – as Lorenzo Vianelli, Nick Gill and Nicole Hoellerer (2021) acutely begin to observe with specific reference to the case of asylum claimants waiting for their appeal after receiving a denial to their claim, but with an argument easily extendable to other cases as well – *accoglienza* beneficiaries are not simply supposed to wait *patiently* (McNevin and Missbach, 2018, pp. 27-28, quoted in Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021) during the prolonged in-

¹⁸⁶ In presenting the UNHCR official definition, Krause and Schmidt (2020, p. 23) describe the two concepts as follows: “self-reliance as refugees’ capabilities to satisfy their crucial needs sustainably and resilience as refugees’ and host countries’ abilities to cope with hardships and adapt to conditions (UNHCR 2005: Book 2 1; UNHCR ExCom 2017: 3)”.

betweens separating one phase of their ‘integration’ journey from the next: they are rather expected to spend their time-in-waiting *productively*. That is to say, to show both authorities and social workers alike that they are prone to entrepreneurship, autonomy, and self-improvement; that they want to ‘integrate’, and, in fact, that they have their own life project spread out in front of them – crucially enough, a life project that happens to coincide with the one envisioned for them by *accoglienza* itself: learning the Italian language, finding a regular job, and ultimately becoming productive members of Italian society. Crucially enough, unmistakable presumptions of post-migration immobility loom large here. Refugees are indeed expected to be willing to train to become ‘good citizens’ of the state which is hosting them (Marchetti, 2020, p. 238; Ong, 2003, p. xvii) – or at least to approximate to this ideal as much as they can –, as well as “to respond positively to humanitarian interventions but *not aspire to move on*” (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023, p. 3820, emphasis added): a ‘moving on’ which is existential, as much as it is geographical (*ibid.*).

Albeit being dispensed ‘for free’, then, *accoglienza* does nonetheless come at a cost: one that Atif, on her part, does not seem too interested in paying. As it soon becomes clear, during her stay in the project she does not show the set of inclinations that is, instead, more or less explicitly being expected of her there: she is not particularly keen on learning Italian, does not step forward when it comes to joining the professionalizing courses offered within the network, and rather lets time pass as it comes. It is Anna herself who, during one of my periodic visits to the Rainbow Hub, manifests to me her concern about Atif on this regard: she has been ‘lucky’ with the SAI camp that she has been assigned to – not least ‘thanks’ to her special vulnerability (i.e., her SOGI-based refugee status) –, as it is extremely rare to be hosted in such nice facilities in a central area of the city. However, Anna emphasizes, Atif should make an effort to show the camp workers that she is proactive and, she says, “*progettuale*” (lit. ‘life project-oriented’), otherwise her stay in the center might end up being terminated sooner than expected (fieldnotes, 05/24)¹⁸⁷. Upon hearing this, the thought of Atif potentially ending up on the streets enters my minds and starts to trouble me, and from that moment onwards I worriedly begin to attempt a mediation with her on this last point. At the cost of relinquishing my own political and academic beliefs about the faulty nature of the concept of ‘integration’ itself (see Schinkel, 2018; see also Favell, 2019), each time Atif and I meet, I try to enquire about professionalizing courses and Italian language classes being offered by her SAI. With a certain obstinacy, I insist she joins them as soon as she can, only to be invariably met, however, with the highest levels of elusiveness possible

¹⁸⁷ For holders of international protection, the standard duration of the reception period within a SAI project is fixed at 6 months. This timeframe, however, can be extended up to one year, and – in exceptional cases, as it happened with the COVID-19 emergency, for instance, or for particularly vulnerable beneficiaries – even beyond that limit (AIDA, 2023). Hence, what Anna and I begin to fear for Atif is, first of all, a denial of her extension of stay within the SAI due to a lack of initiative on her part throughout the first six months of her stay; and, secondly, the fact the Atif is missing out on ‘precious’ opportunities that will not be offered her again, once her reception period is declared concluded.

from her. All that she wants – and she wants it *now* – is a house for herself, a nice husband, and a stable job, ideally as a jewelry designer: things that the SAI network does not seem to be able to provide her with, let alone in the short term. As illustrated in the opening vignette, after six months spent in dangerous ‘idleness’¹⁸⁸, without properly benefitting of the ‘privileged’ position within the SAI network that her special vulnerability afforded her, in the midst of an otherwise unremarkable Roman summer Atif finally manages to get enlisted for a sewing course that she seems to like, as well as to be selected to potentially move to another SAI, hopefully away from the harassment experienced up until that point. Things are seemingly falling into place for her, in other words. And yet, this is exactly when Atif decides to leave the system. She leaves it for good, even, and by doing so gives up on all the relative advantages that, at least on paper, Italian *accoglienza* envisions for vulnerable refugees, and vulnerable refugees only.

When looking at Atif’s decision from this angle, ‘unreasonable’ is perhaps the first adjective that comes to mind to describe it – it is, at least, the first adjective that comes to *my* mind, while trying to process the unexpected news of her abrupt exit from the project that I receive from Anna. And yet, aided as I am now by the benefit of both temporal and emotional distance that writing requires, I want to advance a sensibly different argument here: namely, that this reductive interpretation of Atif’s move constitutes the result of a conflation of different perspectives – those of the state, social work/activism, and academic research, as well as of single individuals who between the state, social work/activism, and research move and work (see Bakewell, 2008) – which says more about the workings of the Italian reception system and overall logic for the management of migrants and refugees, than about Atif’s worldview, needs, and desires themselves, no matter how ambivalent and inconsequential these might seem (see Casa-Cortes et al., 2015). In fact, the jarring character of Atif’s move out of that same system which is in charge of ‘welcoming’ her and favoring her ‘integration’ into Italy – and, interestingly enough, exactly when things are starting to look up, and the path to integration itself seems to be in the process of becoming as straight as ever for her – is one that appears as jarring in the first place only if looked at from the same State-centric perspective upon which the existence itself of Italy’s apparatus for migration management is premised (Glick-Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Schinkel, 2018). That is to say, from that same perspective which only sees refugees as exceptionally vulnerable individuals, forced to escape their homes in desperate search for safety elsewhere, and, *on that ground alone*, as deserving of protection and integration provisions by the Italian state. In other words, exclusively as immobile recipients of policy measures, rather than as active participants in their own complex im/mobility decisions and trajectories (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). Again, as beneficiaries of Italy’s faltering *accoglienza*, rather than as full-blown human subjects, endowed with

¹⁸⁸ For a first, more thorough critique of this idea of idleness regarding Atif’s story, see also Chapter Two, Section 2.3.4.

desires, anxieties, and idiosyncrasies, which, incidentally, rarely match those envisioned for them by the same system that produced them as ‘refugees’ in the first place. That said, here I am not attempting to downplay the pivotal role that suffering and, indeed, vulnerability can have in determining the course of a refugee’s life, including her mobility journey and subsequent access to specific reception measures. Neither am I suggesting that Italy’s reception system should not at all accommodate the additional needs of people who embark on so-called ‘forced’ paths of migration, vis-à-vis other, potentially more privileged, mobility routes. And yet, in line with what Miriam Ticktin (2011, p. 24) reminds us in the introduction to her work on what she terms “the antipolitics of care” of France’s immigration regimes, I also stand by the fact that “there is a fine line between recognizing suffering and fetishizing it as the fundamental and only basis of a common humanity”. Starting off from acknowledging that Italy’s logics of *accoglienza* do drift into such fetishizing tendencies quite consistently (see also Apostolova, 2015), what I want to do here is to rather highlight the totalizing and faulty character that the discursive sphere of vulnerability can assume, once it becomes the only available ground for people to access their im/mobility rights: the right to move across borders, of course, but also to eventually stop and settle, if so desired, as well as to keep on moving beyond the institutional boundaries of reception itself. In doing so, I ultimately want to foreground the broader impasse that a vulnerability-centered approach to migrant reception produces, both for those that get excluded by its rationale, as well as for those that manage to fall within its range of action.

As the discussion above started clarifying, such a restrictive view of refugeeness as strategically pivoting on vulnerability is one required – but also one further reproduced, in turn – first of all by the broader rationale lying behind migration policies in and of themselves, which, in the case of contemporary Italy, on people’s vulnerability are actively premised. A small but crucial clarification is due here. Even though Italy’s current socio-political climate – characterized as it is by the recrudescence of nationalist, racist, and anti-immigration discourses – might lead one to think otherwise, such policies are not to be simplistically read as aiming at the full closure of Italy’s borders: that is, at the full indictment of border-crossing to anyone who gets ascribed to the vague and otherwise unspecified category of the ‘immigrant’ and/or the ‘unwanted foreigner’ (i.e., shapeless masses of non-white, non-Christian, non-Western people, coming up at Italy’s borders potentially unrestrained). Albeit not wrong per se, this reading nonetheless comes up short in making sense of what concretely happens on the ground – including Atif’s and other participants’ experiences *of*, and, crucially, *against*, their own refugeeness, cropping up all over this research. In fact, notwithstanding the undeniable discursive centrality held by this project of border-defense – a project more political than practical in nature –, Italy’s contemporary migration policies are to be better understood through the lens of management (i.e., of careful control and rational planning), than of outright exclusion (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015;

Collins, 2018; see also Ghosh, 2007). The difference might seem subtle, but is a fundamental one, instead: one whose performative effects actively shape the lived realities of the people who attempt, and at times manage, to cross borders and settle in the Italian territory. The division itself between voluntary, economic migrants – to be strictly controlled via fixed quotas –, and forced migrants/refugees – to be granted protection and reception if, and only if, proven to be truly qualifying for it – is but a product of the managerial approach to transnational mobilities currently being enforced in Italy and Europe more broadly (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Collins, 2018)¹⁸⁹. It is exactly within this broader managerial scope, then, that the workings of the Italian reception system have to be placed and made sense of, including the implicit construction of the refugee as the primary legitimate subject of mobility – and thus as the legitimate recipient of reception measures –, and the consequent marginalization of so-called ‘voluntary’ migrants as illegitimate movers. The former takes place via the establishment of refugees’ absolute victimhood, which has to paradoxically translate, in turn, as both docility and projectuality (*progettualità*) – in other words, as eagerness, on the part of refugees themselves, not to step out of, and to abide to, the confines of reception and integration expressly designated for them (Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Müller-Funk, Üstübcici and Belloni, 2023). The latter happens, in contrast, by way of ascribing the cause of mobility to will rather than constraint, and by coterminously qualifying will itself as a non-legitimate ground for entry: migrants who move (allegedly) not because they are being forced to do so by dire circumstances, but simply *because they feel like it* – as Giorgia Meloni famously lamented of in 2019: “*perché gli va*”¹⁹⁰ – have to be stopped in their tracks. Lines of color, nationality, passport strength, religion, and class, among other things, are all clearly at play in shaping the contours of a managerial game in which will and constraint get weaponized one against the other, making it discursively impossible for the ‘economic migrant’ to be seen as in need of proper reception measures, on the one hand, and for the ‘refugee’ to be seen as endowed with desires beyond mere survival, on the other (Müller-Funk, Üstübcici and Belloni, 2023)¹⁹¹. As several scholars have pointed out (see e.g., Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; Koser and Martin

¹⁸⁹ As this entire section thoroughly argues, contemporary national and European migration policies are mostly interested in the management of migratory flows – a management that in Italy reads evermore frequently, albeit not exclusively, as containment: asylum claimants, if proven truly in need of protection, get their shot at ‘integration’ via their vulnerability, while so-called ‘bogus’ refugees and economic migrants get easily turned into the scapegoats of the migration crisis. Additionally, asylum claimants and refugees clearly do not get their protection ‘for free’: they have to prove to be willing to integrate and to build their brand-new life in Italy according to such integration schemes. When Anna expresses her concern about Atif’s lack of *progettualità*, it is this whole system that she is implicitly quoting – the same system that I immediately incorporate, the moment I begin mediating, albeit failingly, between Atif and her SAI project.

¹⁹⁰ The snippet of Giorgia Meloni’s speech where she expresses her outrage at people who migrate “because they feel like it” was set to music and made into a satirical song by Italian tv program Propaganda Live, which soon enough became a meme of viral proportion in Italy. The sketch can be listened to at the following link:

<https://www.la7.it/propagandalive/video/perche-gli-va-la-hit-di-fabio-celenza-sul-global-compact-07-12-2018-258089> [accessed 31/01/2026].

¹⁹¹ Suffice it to think that young, white, middle-class Europeans like me, for instance, can easily cross borders “just because they want to”, without being discursively, legally, and materially transported into any realms of migrantness.

2011; Malkki 1995; Richmond 1993; Zetter 2015), this framework is inadequate first of all because it fails to account for the complexities of migration as they concretely manifest on the ground: people with diverse, more or less coercive motivations often move together; individuals' legal or social status may shift over time, or simultaneously correspond to multiple categories; and vulnerabilities are often created and/or enhanced during the migratory journey or in the aftermath of its completion, rather than solely acting as the factors that drive migration in the first place (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; see also Collyer and de Haas 2012; Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021; Koser and Martin 2011; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Pinelli, 2017). These dynamics alone already complicate the possibility to confidently draw neat boundaries between one migration category and the other – between people who move because they want to, and people who do so because they have no other choice –, thus revealing the categories themselves to be an imperfect policy tool, and an even more imperfect framework for research (Bakewell, 2008; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). And yet, what is even more dangerous about this inevitably flawed and partial system of classification is that, against its composite backdrop, a hierarchical scale of migrant legitimacy forms – one which pivots on the faulty abstraction of the two realms of will and constraint as inherently dichotomic, as well as on the sequestering of will and constraint each, in two distinct categories of subjectivity-in-mobility: the economic migrant – illegitimate, if not in small, controlled numbers; vs. the refugee – legitimate, but only if thoroughly proven to be genuine in her victimhood (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). A scale which is then deployed, politically and managerially, “to distinguish, divide and discriminate between those on the move” (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018, p. 52).

What I want to suggest at this point is thus the following: not only is this schema enormously detrimental for all of those who happen to lie beyond the scope of refugeeness – e.g., ‘economic’ and ‘labor’ migrants, undocumented and/or unhoused individuals, people in-between migration categories –, as well as for those who fail at doing their refugeeness right, to paraphrase Butler’s famous formulation (1988, p. 522) – e.g., alleged ‘bogus’ refugees, unsuccessful claimants waiting for their appeal, *dublinati*¹⁹², people coming from places belonging to so-called ‘safe countries lists’¹⁹³. But such a

¹⁹² ‘Dublinato’ refers to people to whom the Dublin Regulation has been applied. It usually indicates, in other words, a person who has applied for asylum in one EU country, but is considered the responsibility of another Member State (almost invariably, the country of first entry), and is therefore subject to transfer under the Dublin Regulation.

¹⁹³ The concept of ‘safe country of origin’ was introduced in Italian legislation by Law Decree no. 113/2018, implemented by Law 132/2018 (AIDA, 2023, p. 105). Lists of safe countries of origin are periodically updated and notified to European Commission (ibid.) At the time of writing, Italy’s safe country list, as defined by Law Decree no. 158/2024, include: Albania, Algeria, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Morocco, Montenegro, Peru, Senegal, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia. People coming from these countries who apply for international protection are redirected towards the so-called ‘*procedura accelerata*’ (lit. ‘accelerated procedure’), whereby the Territorial Commission takes a decision within 9 days (AIDA, 2023, p. 107) – almost invariably a denial, on grounds of the request itself being ‘unfounded’. For several of the countries in the list, however, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines specific categories of people, and/or or parts of the country, for which the presumption of safety cannot apply (AIDA, 2023, p. 106). This is the case, for instance, of LGBT+ people in Bangladesh, given the fact the homosexuality is actively criminalized in the country, and the presence of anti-homosexual legislation – no matter

centrality of vulnerability comes at a high discursive and material cost for ‘successful’ (read: ‘credible’, ‘truthful’, ‘genuine’) refugees, too. By framing the refugee as a fragile and highly-dependent subject, while coterminously expecting her full responsiveness when it comes to embracing the measures specifically envisioned for her reception and integration (Krause and Schmidt, 2020; see also Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021), *accoglienza* actively strives to reduce her to a mere policy recipient, thus shrinking the range of desires that the refugee can express to those that the reception system has already expressed on her behalf (see Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023). In other words, it proves unable to recognize the refugee as a fully-human social actor, endowed with desires, aspirations, and projects, which can be more or less future-oriented, more or less linear, and more or less thoughtfully-planned – to put it bluntly, which can make more or less ‘sense’ and be more or less ‘reasonable’, at least within the contours of ‘sense’ and ‘reason’ contemplated by the reception-integration nexus itself (see Collins, 2018). The moment such desires show up – because they do show up, indeed – is exactly when the system gets exposed as lacking the capacity to see and/or accommodate them, as if they could not possibly belong to the fabric of refugeeness in the first place.

Atif’s decision to abandon the reception system, and, before that, her reluctance to abide to its unwritten logics of linear development and obedient productivity, both testify to the profoundly flawed dynamics scrutinized so far. What, in virtually every other condition, would have been framed as a rather unremarkable life choice – following a friend to another town under the pretext of going ‘on holiday’, and then deciding to try and move there – assumes an entirely different weight and meaning here, when it is a legally recognized SOGI refugee to enact it: a presumably vulnerable individual, who, in the midst of the overall scarcity of resources and infrastructures characterizing Italy’s reception system nowadays (see e.g., Milani, 2025), has been bestowed the ‘gift’ of *accoglienza* precisely on grounds of such a vulnerability, and thus should be, if not outright grateful (Buxton and Gibney, 2024; Marchetti, 2020), at least able to make the most out of it in order to productively construct her brand new Italy-based life project (Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021). Instead, Atif leaves: not only *accoglienza* – her precious seat inside *seconda accoglienza*, to be more precise; but Italy tout court, thus doubly falling short of the unwritten imperatives of refugeeness, including that of post-migration geographical immobility (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023). Indeed, the fact that such an exit happens via the actualization of Atif’s mobility aspirations to another city first, and to another country soon after, cannot but make it an even more ‘aberrant’ move to enact (ibid.): one that, resulting as it does from the attachment of a blatant

whether thoroughly implemented or not – is deemed to be persecutory per se by Italian asylum law: enough of a ground, that is, to infer that there would be no protection from the State in case of persecution of the subject by non-State actors, and thus to lodge an application on SOGI grounds in Italy (Boccaletti and Mastellari, 2017; Danisi et al., 2021; de Capitani and del Guercio, 2021; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011).

instantiation of voluntary mobility to the paradigmatic form of forced mobility par excellence (i.e., refugeeeness), generates a seismic glitch, if not an outright rupture, in the managerial fabric of Italy's reception-integration nexus.

It is exactly at such juncture, then, that actions like the one enacted by Atif get framed by policy-makers and social workers – at times, by researchers, too – as irrational and counterproductive ones to make. Which, to an extent, they are: both irrational and counterproductive. After all, Atif herself gives up on a series of material benefits whose practical value is hardly contestable: a place where to live without paying rent, food to eat, pocket money, professionalizing courses, linguistic mediation, psychological support, and more. At the same time, this way of framing the issue overlooks the fact that Atif is simply acting out of the utterly humane desire to further improve her life. A desire, more specifically, to leave behind a confined place where her 'queerness' makes her an easy target of violence; a desire to follow a friend abroad and try out life in a new city; ultimately, a desire to attempt to free herself from the obligation to engage in things that she simply does not care about enough – boring language classes and unsatisfying professionalizing courses, for instance. In their broader reflection on the consequences of methodological nationalism for the discipline of migration studies, Nina Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar (2013, p. 139) pose their readers a simple yet compelling question, which, if translated here, I believe can provide a fruitful lead into understanding Atif's move out of *accoglienza* in a much more desire-attuned mode: "What do we see" – they straightforwardly ask – "if we do not think about mobility like a nation-state?"¹⁹⁴. Following their lead, I want to argue that Atif's decision only appears as an aberration if observed from the perspective of the nation-state, and of those same policies of migration management that from the state emanate. If we were to give up on this viewpoint, Atif's abrupt exit from *accoglienza* would rather appear as a situated and embodied response to a system that stifles her, before it can even begin to 'welcome' her: one that offers pre-packaged, linear routes to 'protection' and 'integration' primarily premised on conditions of compliance, rather than on openness towards people's individual subjectivities and desires; and hence, one that struggles to accommodate the 'irrational' complexities of migrants as people, first and foremost, rather than solely as beneficiaries of reception measures (Müller-Funk, Üstübici and Belloni, 2023). Francis Collins (2018, p. 965) underscores what lies behind this framework clearly:

¹⁹⁴ In answering their own question, Glick-Schiller and Salazar (2023, p. 139) provide an input perfectly in line with the broader epistemological direction taken by this chapter, and thesis as a whole. They write: "The conceptual terrain we can envision when we think beyond the lens of the nation-state allows us to build a regimes-of-mobility approach that sees movement and settlement in constant and reconstituting interrelationships" – exactly the dynamic that this chapter, too, hopes to contribute to illuminate.

[M]igration management relies on an idea of the migrant as a utility-maximising individual who – when provided with full access to information and freed from constraints – can make migration decisions that will serve his or her own interests and for which he or she can be held responsible.

But, as a human being, the ‘migrant’ cannot be reduced to this fictive character alone. And thus, the first thing that we see once we renounce to take up for ourselves the managerial gaze of the nation-state is, simply enough, ‘migrants’ as people: as “aspiring” (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023, p. 3817), “pleasure seeking” (Manalansan IV, 2006, p. 243) individuals, who, albeit being subjected by migration regimes into fetishistically occupying *one* among the currently-available migratory categories (Apostolova, 2015), nonetheless exceed the latter’s discursive grids, overflow their borders, and, in doing so, contribute to expose the fictiveness of such categories in the first place – a painfully performative fictiveness, no doubt, whose effects are felt the most concretely by the same subjectivities that the categories produce in the first place (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018).

In conclusion, I want to devote the final portion of this section to further develop one last, related point – both theoretical and methodological in nature –, which the present discussion should compel us to take into account, but which has only been hinted at so far. I am referring to the fact that such a restrictive view of migrantness and refugeeness, as critically delineated all throughout these pages, does not get fabricated by policies and policymakers alone, but is often more or less willingly reproduced by migration activism and research, too (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018): each time that activists, social workers, and researchers – in fact, the three of them can coincide – uncritically rely on migration categories and their implications as a given, as descriptors of an uncontested reality, rather than as the active producers of that same reality to begin with (Apostolova, 2015; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018); but also, and very much relatedly, each time that the rationale of the state gets taken up as the interpretative lens through which to look at migrants’ moves within or without the systems put into place to confine them (Schinkel, 2018). My own erratic reaction to the news of Atif’s decision to leave the SAI network – following a previous, equally erratic reaction to a comment on Atif’s alleged lack of project-oriented aspirations inside the SAI project – can be taken up as instructive enough examples of this drift that research can more or less voluntarily take: of the clashes that can occur between different discursive and value systems when a participant’s desires and plans show up, and, by simply existing, manage to produce a glitch in the system – in the *accoglienza* system, of course, but, to an extent, in the research system, too. Torn between my own academic and political beliefs about Italy’s faulty reception-cum-integration machine, the awareness about Atif’s right to live her life as she deems fit¹⁹⁵, and the fear that Atif might catastrophically fall

¹⁹⁵ An awareness which is mine, as much as it is Anna’s and the other Rainbow Hub’s workers and volunteers. As the field diary excerpt above testifies to, Anna never tries to stop Atif, and neither she judges her exit move. In fact, she

through the cracks of the system if left alone with her ‘agency’ outside the SAI network, the moment she chooses exit as her strategy and – temporarily – disappears from my radars, I find myself left to deal with the impasse that this exit produces (see also Jacobsen and Landau 2003)¹⁹⁶: one seemingly unresolvable within the current state of things, but, perhaps exactly for this reason, all the more meaningful¹⁹⁷.

To set the record straight, an entanglement between policy and research as the one that I, too, found myself caught into is, to borrow from Willem Schinkel’s (2018, p. 15) words, “nothing special”: in fact, it happens and gets reproduced all the time. But it is also a “highly consequential” (ibid.) one, especially in a time and place like contemporary Italy, where the uncritical reproduction of dominant logics of migration management – with all their implications in terms of hierarchical categorizations and related divisions among people on the move – should no longer be an option for those interested in carrying out a properly critical reading of contemporary experiences of human im/mobility, both across and within nation-state borders. Schinkel (2018, p. 9) perfectly sums up the broader issue at stake as follows:

If social science wishes to be more than a reiteration, reification and fetishization of conflictive self-descriptions, of received common sense or of policy ideologies, it is necessary to imagine ‘society’ against the grain. To imagine what happens when ‘migrants’ move against the grain of today’s ‘immigrant integration’ discourse. It is thus important to undo, or to actively work against, the existing imagination about what happens when people move and settle in another country.

remains supportive all throughout Atif’s temporary disappearance, and repeatedly makes clear that the Rainbow Hub will remain a reference point for Atif, if she were ever to decide to come back. However, as the discussion carried out in this section has been showing, the workings of Italy’s reception system are much subtler than this, and operate independently of the will of individual social workers, volunteers, and researchers.

¹⁹⁶ As Bakewell (2008, p. 434), quoting, in turn, Jacobsen and Landau (2003), stresses, “[r]esearchers working on forced migration struggle to keep up with this ‘dual imperative’ of both conducting rigorous academic research and being policy relevant”. At times, it is exactly in an attempt of making their work policy-relevant enough, that researchers end up confounding their point of view and intentions with those embraced by the state in its broader project of managing migration – something which, I believe, can turn out to be particularly risky in the current Italian socio-political climate.

¹⁹⁷ I would be lying if I said that Atif’s abrupt move – and the months of disappearance that followed: a period during which Atif stopped replying to messages, or only did so in very elusive ways – did not have an impact on both myself and this research. After all, Atif was the very first participant that I had met, as well as the one that I had been engaging the most frequently and across the vastest realms of life and/in migration with. Even more crucially so, research was but one dimension of our relationality. Having met Atif at the Rainbow Hub where I soon became the main mediator between her and the association workers, I also inevitably found myself torn between a set of opposing forces: my own personal beliefs and positionality as researcher – one mostly critical of the workings and logics of Italian migration management; my duties as volunteer, endowed with the responsibility to make sure that Atif could be able to understand and navigate the systemic distortions of the Italian reception system in the best way possible; as well as my personal frustrations and worries for a person whom, with time, I had started to perceive more and more as a friend, rather than solely as a research participant. Keeping the threads of my multi-sidedness (Burger et al., 2024) together proved extremely challenging at the time, at least until Atif came back to Italy and we gradually managed to reestablish contact – contact which lasts to this day, exactly three years after our first meeting.

Even if we were to momentarily assume, here, that the concept of integration makes sense at either the discursive or the material level – which, according to many, it doesn’t (see again Schinkel, 2018) –, following the trace of Schinkel’s invitation to reimagine migration “against the grain” (p. 9), we shall thus ask ourselves an entirely different set of questions: not so much, why would a refugee escape the System for Reception and Integration? As, why should a refugee even want to integrate in the first place? Why cannot other possibilities be contemplated for her, without these possibilities risking eroding her right to mobility and reception in the first place? Suffice it to think that Atif does not want to, strictly speaking, ‘integrate’, but that this does not mean, coterminously, that she does not need or want reception. If anything, her approach to *accoglienza* is much more pragmatic and immediate than what ‘integration’ would like it to be, with Atif ideally wanting to take from the system all the she can. And in fact, she believes that what Italy has to give her is not enough, if compared, for instance, to how things work in France or Germany, where – so she has heard – people receive more pocket money, more housing opportunities, more jobs (fieldnotes, 06/24). In wanting everything that reception has to offer her and more – and, even more crucially so, in wanting it how *she* wants it, not how *accoglienza* wants her to want it –, Atif is inevitably stepping out of the confined fences of refugeeness, at least as they get more or less implicitly defined by Italy’s machine of migration management. That is to say, as coterminously resting on expectations of absolute victimhood and vulnerability; deservingness and gratitude (Buxton and Gibney, 2025; Marchetti, 2020); social mobility, in the form of entrepreneurship and self-reliance, and geographical immobility (Krause and Schmidt, 2020; Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023; Vianelli, Gill and Hoellerer, 2021). Not only is she, in other words, moving out of the material, physical spaces of *accoglienza*, but also out of the discursive confines of what a good refugee can want, and of what she can do to get it, that *accoglienza* attempts to establish for her. It is ultimately this latter juncture that, I believe, a properly critical approach to the study of contemporary migrations should strive to grasp.

3.2.3. Additional Nuances of Refugeeness: Stretching Migration Categories from Within

The one that I have delineated all throughout the previous section constitutes a particularly insightful epistemological lens to look at what happens when a legally-recognized SOGI refugee like Atif chooses to exit the reception system for good – apparently against all odds, but actually by way of manifesting a humanness that the system itself had not anticipated could exist. Crucially enough, Atif’s abrupt decision to abandon the SAI network and renounce to her spot in Italy’s network of *accoglienza* represents but one of plenty other modalities through which policy-imbued ideals of refugeeness/migrantness can be proven to be, if not ‘wrong’ in their entirety, at least partial and flawed. In fact, this project alone abounds in instances where refugeeness gets questioned from within,

directly by the people to whom it gets attributed in the first place: not necessarily in the same way as Atif does, or with the same intents, but always meaningfully nonetheless. According to Lena Müller-Funk, Ayşen Üstübcü, and Milena Belloni's analysis (2023), two are the main modalities via which refugees themselves tend to carry out this critical operation: either by opposing and exiting its coercive border regimes (as Atif herself does), or by outright rejecting the 'refugee' identity and the stereotypical representations that come with it. Having devoted the previous section to apprehending the former set of strategies by taking Atif's abrupt exit from the reception system as the cue to structure the analysis, here, it is instead to an exploration of the latter that I want to turn. More specifically, I want to take into account the highly contested discursive and material relationalities with the realm of refugeeness itself, as they emerge in the life stories of two other primary participants in this research, both of them legally recognized as refugees in Italy on grounds of their SOGI: Sam, whose experiences of sexual migration I have already amply discussed in Chapter Two (see Section 2.2.), and Shanto, to whose story I will devote a consistent portion of Chapter Four (see Section 4.3.).

I am inaugurating the discussion with Shanto, a young middle-class refugee from Bangladesh who had not initially planned to settle in Italy, but nonetheless ends up applying and qualifying for international protection on grounds of his sexual orientation there, as a result of more or less serendipitous circumstances that I will set out to retrace soon (for a more thorough discussion of Shanto's story, see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.). When taking a first look at Shanto's asylum trajectory in Italy, it sure appears to be quite distant from Atif's and her 'disorderly' choices of post-migration, secondary mobility. After dealing with the entire asylum procedure with resolve and as rapidly as he possibly can¹⁹⁸, Shanto spends the designated six months in his allotted place within a local SAI project, after which he decides to exit the reception system and step into 'autonomy'. He moves in a rented room in a shared apartment with a couple of other Bangladeshi acquaintances, and begins working a demanding but rather remunerative seasonal job in a restaurant. After two years of constant hustling, Shanto eventually manages to achieve a level of economic stability that not only enables him to make ends meet, but also allows him to indulge in the occasional splurge and make his first trips around Europe, all the while also providing financial support to his family in Dhaka, via the regular sending of remittances. This path followed by Shanto thus seems to almost perfectly fit the linear trajectory to autonomy that the SAI network itself, as well as the broader logics underlying the international asylum framework, so eagerly promote for refugees. And yet, this almost idyllic picture begins to unravel the moment it is put in conversation with the highly conflicted relationship that Shanto himself has, instead, with his own status as a refugee – and not just any refugee, anywhere: a SOGI refugee, in Italy.

¹⁹⁸ Indeed, he does not fail to brag to me about how quick he was in getting refugee status: less than a year from his arrival.

Truth is, Shanto never wanted to become a refugee in the first place, neither did he plan to travel to Italy as an ‘illegal’ immigrant, like his *boro mama*¹⁹⁹ did thirty years prior. Shanto knew too well how hard it had been for his uncle, and did not want to find himself in a similar position – one further aggravated, in his case, not only by the progressive tightening of Italy’s migration laws over the last thirty years (see Colucci, 2018; see also earlier on in this chapter, Section 3.2.1.)²⁰⁰, but also by his peculiar positionality as a closeted bisexual man. In leaving Bangladesh for Europe, Shanto’s plan was, rather, to obtain a work visa for an Eastern European country thanks to the help of a broker, get a temporary residence permit and, after five years, a passport there, and ultimately keep travelling back and forth between Bangladesh and Europe on a regular basis. When the broker’s arrangements turn out to be “a scam” and Shanto realizes that he has been, quite literally, “kidnapped” in a hostile country that will not provide him with any of the documents necessary to stay (fieldnotes, 02/23; 12/23), however, he finds himself with no other options left than to escape to Italy: a country not too far from where he is being kept captive, and where he can at least hope to get some support from those among his family members who are still residing there. Even if Shanto’s uncle eventually moved to the U.K. with his family – a relatively common practice among Italy-based Bangladeshis (see e.g., Della Puppa and King, 2018) –, several others of his uncles, cousins, and family friends are still living in Italy, part and parcel of a dense Bangladeshi presence that Shanto, too, eventually finds himself compelled to become part of (see Ministero del Lavoro, 2023a). During an informal recorded conversation that we share roughly one year into my fieldwork, he retraces the scene as follows (interview, 06/24):

S: The chain [was] started by my *boro mama*... my mom’s brother: you know who the *boro mama* is. So, the chain started with my *boro mama*. He was an illegal immigrant. And I never choose to be an illegal immigrant. So, if that shit had not happened in [name of Eastern European country], I never might have come to Italy, you know? [...] My plan was that I will stay in [name of the country] and work [there] 6 months, and I’ll leave [for Bangladesh] another 6 months, and I will come to [Europe]...

[...]

S: I will wait for five years... After five years I will get my passport. Then, I will move to other countries legally... But what happened there, it was out of my plans, and that plan made me come to Italy.

V: So, you didn’t want to come here [in Italy] with your family at the beginning?

¹⁹⁹ ‘*Boro mama*’ is a Bangla kinship term composed of ‘*boro*’ (lit. ‘elder’ or ‘big’) and ‘*mama*’ (lit. ‘maternal uncle’), which literally translates as ‘elder maternal uncle’.

²⁰⁰ Shanto’s uncle benefitted from a *sanatoria* in the early 2000s, through which he managed to regularize his status and consolidate his presence in Italy. In fact, Shanto, too, would have much rather followed a similar path. However, such a measure has stopped being regularly implemented in the Italian context (see Colucci, 2018), with some notable exceptions such as the pandemic period.

S: No, I... really... It's not because of... I know if I come [to Italy], I have to be illegal here. I have to be a refugee here! I told you that I am not enjoying the status I have. I don't want to be a refugee here! I know I am that status. So, if I have a chance to convert, I'll immediately convert that status. But now I don't have that chance.

Even though Shanto's long family history of migration to Italy had taught him better than wanting to risk the way of 'illegality' and play the asylum lottery there, when reality fails to live up to his plans, he nonetheless finds himself forced to occupy the position that he most wanted to avoid: that of becoming "just a refugee in Italy" (fieldnotes, 12/23; see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). When it comes to Shanto's life- and migration-story, then, refugeeness acquires an entirely different flavor than its 'official' definition and scope of applicability would leave space for. It does so from the very outset, with constraint and vulnerability only entering the picture in oblique, unexpected ways, which are worth briefly analyzing further (for a complete analysis of Shanto's story, see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.).

First of all, it is not possible to isolate will from constraint when it comes to Shanto's decision to leave Bangladesh for Europe. As previously argued, the ambivalence in and of itself is perhaps less dependent on the peculiarities of Shanto's life and migration paths, than on the flawed, managerial assumption that 'will' and 'constraint', as rationales for transnational migration, can be isolated from one another in the first place (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018). It is equally true, however, that this same ambivalence acquires a peculiar, if not enhanced, character throughout the arc of Shanto's im/mobility – an arc of sexual migration that finishes in asylum somewhat 'unexpectedly'. As he tells me once, stammering through an unusually hesitant tone for the confident, non-stop talker that he is, and interspersing each sentence with a long pause: he had to leave Bangladesh... He wanted to leave... He had to... (fieldnotes, 12/23). In Shanto's life trajectory, the distinction between will and constraint, between voluntary and forced movement, is thus undermined from the very outset by the impossibility of establishing, by Shanto himself, whether migration was something that he actively wanted and pursued, or passively had to endure. As I will more thoroughly explore further on in this thesis (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.), this impossibility has to be understood, first of all, against the backdrop of what it means to live life as a middle-class closeted bisexual man in a city like Dhaka: a place equally violent when it comes to forcefully repress unwanted instances of queerness, as it is vibrant in nurturing its (more or less) underground circulations of queer/lgbt+ intimacy, sociality, and organizing (see e.g., Hossain, 2019a; 2019c; Siddiqi, 2011). On the one hand, in fact, Dhaka represents for Shanto the one true place able to offer him small yet substantial openings, where he can truly be himself and live life to the fullest, on a social, sexual, and emotional level. On the other hand, however, the mirage of a better, freer life in Europe shines bright on the horizon of Shanto's prospected futurity, and blinds him with his spark. "In my mind there is the idea that in Europe you have a free

life, [a] better life... You know?" – he tells me once, when replying to my curiosities about the motives for his migration move – "That's the main reason" (interview, 06/24). As I will explore in greater depth throughout the following chapter, and as the current discussion can already begin to give an idea of, Europe's is a spark that, however, ends up becoming ever feebler the closer Shanto gets to it, via migration. Suffice it to think, for now, that the fact that Shanto both *is* and, at the same time, *is not* fleeing Dhaka "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted", as the Geneva Convention recites, pokes a hole right at the heart of his refugeeness, and well before refugeeness has even begun to emerge on the horizon of possibilities that he is ready to contemplate. In fact, applying for international protection on grounds of his sexual orientation is only something that Shanto ends up settling for, when pushed to do so by a global system of im/mobility that cannot conceive of his movement from Bangladesh to an otherwise unspecified elsewhere in Europe in any other ways than this: via force, rather than will; via suffering, rather than pleasure. However, in Shanto's case, if force really lies anywhere – more so than elsewhere, at least – is in the exact system that produces the obligation for him to become a refugee in Italy in the first place, albeit against his will and original plans. A system that turns him into an 'illegal' migrant first, and into a refugee soon after, rather than allowing him to move as a student, a worker, or, simply enough, a traveler (hence: the broker, the scam, the kidnapping, the escape, and, ultimately, Italy) (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, p. 84; Koutonin, 2015). Again, a system that, as paradoxical as it sounds, more than offering him protection after *he is forced* to leave home, *forces* him into seeking protection in order to leave home (see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021; Sciurba, 2018; Sorgoni, 2022). In advancing this argument, I am actively relying on Francesco Della Puppa and Giuliana Sanò's (2021) reconceptualization of the realm itself of 'forced migration', as something dependent less on the violence inherent in the departure context, than on the limited sets of possibilities that migrants are confronted with upon arrival. They frame their argument as follows (p. 507):

By questioning the possible and real meanings of the adjective 'forced', we realized that if forcing exists, it should [...] be framed within the processes of categorization, labelling, infantilization and cohabitation that are put in place when migrants arrive in destination countries (Feldman 2012). By reversing the point of observation, therefore, one can see that people are forced to play the role of the asylum seeker, as otherwise they would be left out of the system or deported; that they are forced to live with other people they do not know (forced cohabitation) within the reception centres; that they are forced to abide by the rules of the system and be dependent on the operators (relationships of dependency and infantilization). Based on these elements, we believe that to be correctly understood, the definition of 'forced' must be applied to the context of arrival and not so much to the reasons for departure.

By reversing the logic of migration categorization, from one focusing on circumstances of departure, to one stressing conditions ensuing arrival, Della Puppa and Sanò (ibid.) provide yet another tool through which to keep unveiling the performative workings of the managerial approach to transnational South-North migration that this chapter has been so intent in criticizing. More specifically, a tool to call out the complicities of the broad framework of migration management in creating the same categories that it claims to be only administering – as well as the conditions of viability of these categories themselves, such as vulnerability –, at the expenses of the same people that get thus categorized. Only from this perspective, I hence want to further stress, it becomes possible to properly look not only *at* refugeeness, but also *through* and *against* it, via the stories and experiences of those people whose life trajectories get bent and directed the most radically by the realm of refugeeness itself.

Coming back to Shanto, a first result of this complex scenario is that he quite simply despises his status as a SOGI refugee – and first and foremost because it is something that he never wanted to obtain in the first place. Additionally, it constitutes a legal status that does come with a heavy baggage attached: one in which discourses of safety, vulnerability, respectability, sexuality, and – crucially – class, too, invariably come to intersect. The socio-legal space opened up by SOGI asylum is, in fact, in and of itself an uncomfortable terrain to inhabit: one that, if exposed, risks exposing, in turn, beneficiaries themselves to sets of violence not necessarily dissimilar from those they experienced before the onset of migration. This is precisely the reason why Shanto lies about, and/or omits, the grounds upon which he got granted protection by the Italian state: because the same tool that allowed him to legally start residing in Italy as a protective measure for the alleged vulnerability looming large on his life *back home* – constituted, in his case, by his ‘queerness’ – has now become, paradoxically enough, the same thing that, if disclosed to the ‘wrong’ people, might put him at risk of becoming even more vulnerable *in migration*, too.

This is not the full picture, however. Shanto’s unease towards having obtained refugee status on SOGI grounds is also tied to his personal critical stances against lgbt+ identity politics and queerness more broadly, as well as on his very middle-class need to disidentify himself from what refugeeness comes to stand for, not so much on a legal level, as on a social one. The first point is one that Shanto makes clear to me from the very beginning of our research relationality: he doesn’t, and shall not feel different because of his orientation. In fact – he even goes as far as to remark – if straight people don’t get asylum for being straight, why would he have to get it for being gay? (fieldnotes, 12/23; see also Section 2.2.3. for similar arguments as espoused by Sam)²⁰¹. When it comes, instead, to the second

²⁰¹ Shanto identifies as bisexual, but often employs gay as an umbrella term – and does so both consciously and strategically. For instance, he identified as gay with the Territorial Commission in order to avoid the potential complications of requesting asylum on grounds of his bisexuality, but in doing so, he did not technically lie, as he explained to me once.

point – in fact, the two are more related than it may seem –, Shanto espouses a perspective that proves to be fairly widespread among my research interlocutors, be they recognized refugees or not: the fact, that is, that the label of the ‘refugee’ itself is lived less as a legal, than as a social category. A social category, more specifically, that carries with itself an entire set of negative associations, that Shanto strives to distance himself from: illiteracy, close-mindedness, and poverty are some of them. In light of this, it is thus imperative to address Shanto’s discomfort towards his own refugeeeness as one stemming from class-fueled ideals of respectability and biases against ‘refugees’ and ‘refugeeness’ more broadly, as much as the materialization of a strategy to disengage from the problematic politics of Italy’s migration management. It is, in fact, both of these things at the same time (see Section 4.4. for a similar analysis of refugeeeness carried out with reference to another participant, Muneeb).

When it comes, instead, to Sam, yet another set of dynamics is at play in determining his discursive distancing from the ‘refugee’ label and everything that it carries: one not too dissimilar from Shanto’s rationales in several points, but somewhat unique in others. Much like Shanto, Sam, too, conceives of his SOGI asylum status as an uncomfortable label that he is not at all fond of: as he vaguely but eloquently tells me once, not only does he “not like the word [refugee]”, but he also finds it pretty much useless: in fact, everything that he is doing – working, earning money, rebuilding his life – he could do “*senza questa etichetta*” (lit. “without this label”) (fieldnotes, 11/25). Even more crucially so, ‘this label’, while being the thing that, from a legal standpoint, allows him to live and work in Italy in the first place, at the same time does so by actively preventing him from going back to Pakistan and reunite with his family members: his aging parents, first of all, but also his wife and child, whom he has not met in over four years. Sam, however, longs to be able to go back, even if temporarily. He longs, in other words, for the one thing that his refugee status will never afford him – i.e., return –, because it is exactly upon the impossibility of return that his refugeeeness got granted to him in the first place. For all these reasons, not too dissimilarly from Shanto, Sam, too, conceives of his SOGI asylum as an inherently temporary status: one that he is actively planning to convert into a hopefully less-consequential work residence permit, which will allow him to free himself from the label in and of itself, first, and regain the possibility of (periodic) returns, second. Once again, the confines between forced and voluntary migration, between being an ‘economic migrant’ and a ‘refugee’, get thus cancelled and rewritten, first and foremost, by those whose lives are the most profoundly impacted by the system of categorization in and of itself – attempted to be cancelled and rewritten, at least.

After all, gay can be used to indicate many different sexual nuances – including lesbian, or bi – and that is exactly how he, too, implicitly relied on the label during his *audizione*.

Additionally, the ambivalent relationality between Sam and his own SOGI refugee status can also be spotted in the everyday unfolding of his life in migration, through the discourses that inform Sam's moving away from the grounds upon which refugees' arrival and settling in Italy are expected to rest upon: 'a moving away' to be understood, here, in its more strictly geographical sense (see Chapter Two, Section 2.2. for a more in-depth insight into Sam's story)²⁰². After he reaches Italy by sea from Libya – incidentally, via an extremely perilous journey that he undertakes without even knowing what destination is awaiting him on the other side –, lodging an asylum claim on SOGI grounds emerges as Sam's only viable path towards staying in Italy and trying to restart his life within the country. Therefore, once he manages to obtain the status, he, too, begins trudging the paths that *prima* and then *seconda accoglienza* open up for him. Throughout the process, and contrary to what seen earlier on with Atif, Sam proves rather eager to engage in all the opportunities that the SAI network has to offer: he joins course after course, takes up all kinds of jobs, and even volunteers to offer other guests his support where needed, drawing on his high degree of education and previous work expertise – he provides help in translating and mediating with social workers, for instance, and in overall supporting other guests through the entangled difficulties of the early stages of life in Italy. All of this goes on more or less smoothly for months, until Sam, too, decides to leave the reception system, following a decision that only apparently fits the autonomy logics of *seconda accoglienza*. If anything, in fact, when looked at up-close, Sam's exit choice, too, helps further stretch from within the confines of what the aforementioned realm of refugees' 'autonomy' can stand for. Yet another, complementary order of desires is in fact at play in directing Sam's exit decision – an extremely suffered decision, for that matter. An order less relating to *accoglienza*'s expectations about its guests' 'projectuality', than to a much more intimate desire/need that, quite literally, had been long consuming Sam from the inside: namely, the desire/need to leave behind, both metaphorically and geographically, a failed relationship with one of his migration companions, whose complications had left him profoundly unstable, if not properly traumatized; stuck in an impasse of suffering that he struggled to resurface from, for months on end²⁰³. Sam's own surroundings – including his CAS and SAI reception camps, the small town where he used to live, the nearby city where he used to spend his free time with his friends – are all haunted by the memories of his former friend/lover, to the point that he can barely move around those places anymore, without anxiety and grief overcoming him. After obsessively

²⁰² These mirror, at times, those already analyzed in reference to Atif's case.

²⁰³ I cannot share any more details about this relationship by Sam's request. Even though it constituted the topic we discussed the most all throughout the time that we knew each other, Sam conceived of those conversations as inherently private, and as going well beyond the purview of my research endeavors. Suffice it to say, here, that Sam fell in love with a migration companion – a sexually confused 'straight' man –, who initially reciprocated him but then entirely changed his attitude towards him, thus leaving Sam wondering for months what had actually happened between the two of them, and what he did wrong.

debating it for what feel like ages, Sam eventually decides to get himself out of the emotional swamp that he had been holding on to for almost a year, leave his spot in the SAI network, and move to a different region, in a rented house that he begins to share with a few other Pakistani roommates. He attempts, in other words, to leave behind the sufferings inflicted upon him by the aforementioned relationship, by enacting a final exit move, which is geographical, as much as it is emotional in nature. More than, and/or in addition to, the completion of Sam's path to autonomy within the SAI network, then, this move stands to represent to Sam something more intimate, personal, and profound. Something that, if it has to necessarily be reduced to research-viable systems of categorization, can perhaps be better understood via the lens of what geographer Andrew Gorman-Murray terms (2009, p. 446; see also pp. 452-454) a "relationship migration": "moving with a partner to consolidate a same-sex relationship—or conversely, moving away after relationship breakdown". If applied to the present context, Gorman-Murray's framework helps acknowledging a reality rarely contemplated for refugees, by either policy or academic literature alike: that is to say, the fact that a refugee's life and im/mobility trajectory can be dictated by the intimate folds of his romantic life, as much as by the vulnerabilities that 'pushed' him out of his country in the first place, to which, instead, reception infrastructures almost exclusively cater. Ironically enough, in the case of SOGI refugees, the two realms are virtually made to coincide, but the logics regulating Italy's reception system still fail to accommodate for the possible consequences of such an overlapping.

'Autonomy', then, represents for Sam the distancing from a painful former affective/romantic relationship, as much as the achieving of financial and labor self-sufficiency or 'integration'. Therefore, his trajectory out of *accoglienza* provides yet another example of how the realm of desire (see Carling and Collins, 2020; Collins, 2018) cannot be isolated from refugees' lives and experiences in migration, including the moves that refugees themselves make, in, around, out, or against networks of reception. Here in this specific case, a realm to be understood, as literally as possible, as 'queer' romantic/sexual desires (see Mai and King, 2009; Manalansan IV, 2006), also in their negative manifestations: as things that haunt, and things that end. As a result, the limited realm of 'forced' migration cannot but end up coexisting, and getting entangled with, other sets of im/mobilities that managerial, policy-based understandings of either refugeeeness or economic migration cannot contemplate: internal, secondary, or temporary im/mobilities; tentative, voluntary, hyper-agentive, irrational im/mobilities; queer, relationship im/mobilities, and many, many more, as the snippets of Atif, Shanto, and Sam's lives relived through these pages can only begin to testify to.

Summing up and concluding, Atif, Shanto, and Sam's migration stories, as well as the ambivalent relationships they all have with their own migration status, prove instructive on several related grounds, especially when apprehended via the broader, critical examination of Italian policies and

discourses of *accoglienza* that this chapter has been built around. First of all, they contribute to further unveil the limitedness of vulnerability as the primary moral-discursive ground for refugeeness to rely on, and, consequently, for reception to be activated – an operation that coterminously allows to apprehend ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ as people first, with all the complex idiosyncrasies that humanness itself is made of. Secondly, they provide clear examples – three examples out of many possible others, in fact – of how ineffective and unrealistic a dichotomic approach to ‘will’ vs. ‘constraint’ can be, when it comes to assessing complex rationales for transnational South-North (sexual) migration projects. And finally, but very much relatedly, they help reveal, once again, categories of migration management for what they truly are: not so much unproblematic descriptors of the nuances of contemporary realities of im/mobility, as, rather, performative tools of government, mired at the containment of those same ambivalently nuanced realities of movement and non-movement into strict discursive boxes (Apostolova, 2015; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Dahinden, Fischer and Menet, 2021; Erdal and Oeppen, 2018) – boxes which, in turn, cannot but fail to make justice to their very own content.

3.3. Im/mobility as Method: Moving Together through the City

All throughout the previous section, I started to adopt, across a first set of ethnographic and theoretical avenues, a perspective deliberately focused on migration as an ongoing process, rather than as a self-contained journey from point A to point B (see Fontanari, 2019): as something that does not stop once migrants’ reach their supposedly ‘final’ destination (Italy, in this case), but rather keeps on unfolding via both geographical and discursive movements, in and out, but also around and against, the reception system and its infrastructures, the realm of refugeeness and the expectations that attach to it, as well as the broader managerial logics dominating both Italian and international migratory frameworks. Such an on-goingness of transnational migration, however, becomes even more concrete and visible once the scale for the analysis of these and other sets of secondary im/mobilities is further downsized to the level of all those mundane, everyday movements and non-movements that migrant people keep on engaging in throughout their daily lives, post-migration – movements which can range, in kind and purpose, from visits to *Questura* or other offices for the fulfillment of migration-related formalities, to leisure-oriented activities like taking a walk, going out to eat, or browsing in stores. Crucially enough, what I want to additionally suggest, here in this section, is that such a downscaling operation is also one via which the boundaries between *looking at* im/mobilities from the outside, and *engaging in* im/mobilities directly, most easily blur. It constitutes, in other words, a juncture where the gap between apprehending these sets of im/mobilities as a theme to be analyzed and explored in research vs. relying on them as actual methodological tools to conduct research in the first place reduces significantly.

I became aware of the shrinkage of this gap gradually in the course of fieldwork and almost serendipitously, once I started noticing patterns in some of my key interlocutors' relationalities with place – the places where we would meet, for instance –, as well as with their/our presence and movements in such places. What initially felt like choices made out of convenience, more than anything else – always eating at the same fast-food restaurant near the station, for instance – turned out to be dense conglomerates of memories, emotions, and meanings, instead. Again, what seemed like quite unremarkable actions, if not outright timepass (see Jeffrey, 2017) – such as taking aimless walks around the city, or engaging in frequent sessions of window-shopping – produced, on the contrary, unexpectedly profound openings into my interlocutors' life-worlds, both in and before migration itself. From then onwards, I thus started to pay increasing attention to the places and the movements of this research, and to consequently tap into them both, as auxiliary tools for the conduction of a project which had started off as primarily rooted in narrative, instead: in fact, as avenues through which new, unforeseen sets of narratives could be brought out into the research-world. This transition from treating mobility exclusively as a theme to be researched, to employing it as a method for the conduction of research in the first place, is precisely the one that I want to retrace and explore in the following pages.

3.3.1. Phenomenology of a Fried-Chicken Shop, or: When Place Becomes a Research Tool

Between the months of April 2023 and July 2024, as part and parcel of the fieldwork that I am then conducting alongside Atif, I find myself in front of the same order of fries, a fried-chicken sandwich, and a large cola, more times than I had likely ever been in the previous twenty-five (plus) years of my life. Importantly enough, an order taken not just from any random place, but always from one out of two very specific fast-food restaurants, located just a few meters away from one another in one of Rome's most central and busiest neighborhoods²⁰⁴. By browsing my field diary entries, I can retrieve at least twenty different recorded occasions²⁰⁵ when these two dingy spots come up as intermediaries between Atif and me²⁰⁶: as places where we go have a quick meal and a chatting session, often followed, right after, by a walk in the surrounding area; but also, as strategic locations that we soon start to rely on simply as our preferred meeting point – one that it becomes virtually useless to even specify:

²⁰⁴ Both restaurants belong, in turn, to two globally-widespread and extremely well-known chains that I will not be naming here, mostly as a way to keep intact some level of opaqueness around the spatial coordinates of the fieldwork I conducted with Atif.

²⁰⁵ Throughout the entire time that I have been knowing Atif, they have become definitively more than twenty. In fact, we occasionally keep on meeting in those places, although we now live in two different cities. Here in this section of the thesis, however, I am referring to the specific timeframe, during which this alternation between the two fast-food became routine for us: the timeframe, that is to say, during which I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork with Atif.

²⁰⁶ To be fair, one of the two fast-food joints comes up much more frequently than the other. The reasons are varied, and include the fact that one of the two tends to be cheaper and have the most convenient meal deals.

when we meet, we meet there. Those two distinct fast-food restaurants become, in other words, actual field sites for my research relationalities with Atif to unfold, and of the particularly relevant kind, for that matter: the places in which I get to learn the most about Atif's current life, her past, her networks of 'queer' sociality, and the ways in which she moves around the world, as well as about her near-devotion for fried chicken, of course²⁰⁷.

When apprehended in isolation, this recurring choice to always meet and eat in these same two neighboring fast-food places might be easily dismissed as one dictated by a rather unremarkable combination of practicality, Atif's own taste in food, and the comfort of routine²⁰⁸. And indeed, this perspective is not inherently wrong, as these three elements all do play a part in structuring Atif's emplaced decisions. Here, however, I want to move beyond this surface-level interpretation, to rather suggest that this spatial pattern can stand to signify way more than a taste- and convenience-driven choice, especially if critically apprehended via what Anne-Lene Sand, Helle Marie Skovbjerg and Lene Tanggaard (2022, p. 597) theorize as "sensory *a-where-ness*"²⁰⁹: a conscious, enhanced attunement to how "place can provide an opportunity to generate knowledge about participants' everyday practices" (p. 594). And indeed, albeit constituting two otherwise anonymous locations – serving standardized junk food, always cramped, and definitely neither cozy nor clean –, the two fast-food joints in question assume an entirely different, much thicker role in the context of this research, and all the more so in the microcosm of research opened up by the relationality flowing between Atif and me: one that cannot be exhausted by a consideration of these places as passive background sets for the conversations that Atif and I share, within the purview of my primarily narrative-based ethnographic endeavors with her. As the ensuing discussion will show, they rather become both the producers *and* the products of Atif's narratives; better yet, of a set of memorialization and resignification techniques tending beyond a purely narrative dimension, to a past time and place in Pakistan, which, in the present place and time of life-in-migration in Italy, is both temporally and geographically out of reach for Atif herself, but which she can nonetheless attempt to recreate, via a proxy-like activation of place, movement, and movement-in-place.

Geography-informed literature has been long vocal in arguing in favor of "making geographical context more explicit within qualitative research methods" (Anderson, 2004, p. 254). And not only

²⁰⁷ The other place being, predictably enough, the lgbt+ association where we first meet, and where I attend all of Atif's meetings, sometimes as a cultural/linguistic mediator, other times simply as an observer and a friend. For instance, I manage to retrieve and make orders among many details of Atif's life during the preparatory meeting that she has at the association, in preparation for her audition with the Territorial Commission.

²⁰⁸ The element of convenience is tied mostly to the fact that both the restaurants in question are located near the station and are thus easily reachable by both Atif and me.

²⁰⁹ More precisely, the concept of "a-where-ness" was initially proposed by Brian Osborne (2001) and then picked-up again by Danielle Drozdowski (2016), before being reformulated as the methodological tool of "sensory a-where-ness" by Sand, Skovbjerg, and Tanggaard (2022).

as a strategy to provide further, more detailed information about the background of research (Sand, Skovbjerg and Tanggaard, 2022), but rather because the link itself between people and place is to be understood as one characterized by what philosopher Edward Casey (2001, p. 684) defines as a relationship of “constitutive coingredience”: that is, by an irreducible, ontological reciprocity, which cannot but flow through human beings and places (see Anderson, 2004; see also earlier on in this thesis Chapter One, Section 1.3.2.), and which, I want to add, life-in-migration can contribute to further exacerbate, and/or make more evident. As Casey (2001, p. 684, emphasis in the original) himself puts it, “[t]he relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence [...] but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is *no place without self and no self without place*”. Starting off from this core assumption, geographer Jon Anderson (2004, p. 257) formulates a proposal to “harness” the coingredience of humans and place as a socio-spatial methodological tool in qualitative research: a move to more properly delve into people’s preferred modalities of knowledge production and inscription, memory recollection, as well as affect curation, in and through place, ultimately aiming at gaining a deeper understanding of how human beings construct both their inner world, and the outer world tout court – the two of them often blurring one into the other. He writes, in this regard (p. 256):

As Casey suggests, the human body physically encounters places (through a process he titles ‘outgoing’) and simultaneously inscribes traces of location on the human self by laying down ‘incoming’ strata of meaning (see Casey 2001, 688). Reciprocally and over time, this process also influences the meaning of places. [...] [D]ue to the co-ingredience of self and place, the spatiality of memory links the social and the personal. Time alongside practice sediments meaning onto places, with personal memories meshing with cultural meanings on an individual and (potentially) societal scale. This fusion or meshing of place and identity thus illuminates the agency of the human self in relating time and space. As a consequence of the reciprocal relations between place, human identity and time, individuals engender meanings and significances for particular places. As the medium and outcome of personalized events and activities, human memory and identity become bound to places by different degrees and extents. As a result, as Casey points out, ‘places [can] possess us – in perception, as in memory... insinuating themselves into our lives’ (Casey 2000, 199).

Atif’s orbiting around the two closely-positioned local branches, in Rome, of two globally-wide-spread fast-food chains, I want to suggest, urgently calls for an analogous operation to the one Anderson (ibid.), via Casey (2001), advocates for above.

The first entry point into the coingredience of Atif’s self – her past, her memories, her habits – and her two beloved fast-food restaurants presents itself to me rather early on in research and quite unexpectedly, during one of the first fried meals that Atif and I find ourselves sharing in Rome. In fact, one of the first among the *many* meals bound to follow in the ensuing months. It is June 2023, a typical, overly hot early-summer afternoon. Atif and I have known each other for about six months,

but we have started to meet outside the locales of the lgbt+ association where we first met only recently. Crucially enough, we have been doing so by always going to the same fried-chicken joint near the station: one that Atif herself had picked up first, and then decided to stick to. For the first time, however, that day Atif suggests we go eat at another fast-food place, located only a few meters away from our habitual spot. I consent without giving it much thought: I really do not mind where my fries and plain vanilla ice-cream are from, they all taste pretty much the same to me – this is, roughly, the line of thought that traverses me in that moment, no hint of sensory *a-where-ness* kicking in just yet (see Sand, Skovbjerg and Tanggaard, 2022). Once seated inside and finally restored by the nice combination of greasy food and air conditioning, Atif and I turn to our usual chitchats, which soon start to circle around Atif’s memories of her Pakistani hometown, a place that she misses intensely and that she does not seem to ever get tired of bringing up in conversation, whenever she gets the chance to. It is at this moment that Atif candidly mentions that in her Pakistani hometown, too, two branches of those same two fast-food chains that we are starting to orbit around together, in Rome, stand just a few meters apart, in a spatial configuration strikingly similar to that of their Roman counterparts. Back home, she explains, she would always alternate between the two, going to one place one time, and to the other place the next, thus engaging in a spatial swinging very similar to the one we have kicked off that day for the first time, and that we will keep on repeating fairly regularly in the months to come. In her city, she keeps on explaining, the two fast-food places are basically located in front of each other, albeit on the opposite banks of the large river that cuts across town. Especially when she was tense and needed some time to herself, Atif used to ride her bike on the bridge connecting the two opposite banks of the river, alternatively picking one out of the two restaurants – located on one side each – whenever she felt like having something to eat. This is why she suggested we visit this other place today, she admits: because this is exactly what she would do back home, too. Atif’s fast-food preference, then, is neither a random, nor a purely taste- or utility-driven decision. Rather, via a set of precisely directed movements and consciously emplaced actions, she is attempting to reproduce, in Rome, a familiar routine that she would regularly engage in, back in Pakistan. More specifically, she is doing so by taking advantage of the similar geographical disposition that the two fast-food places happen to share, both on the Roman and the Pakistani map – in Rome, unfortunately, minus the joy of bike-riding along the river that her Pakistani hometown would afford her. Atif continues recalling these past routines passionately: she talks loud and fast, and gets visibly excited, her words exuding nostalgia. Her enthusiasm is contagious. While she is engrossed in reminiscing, I get curious and type the name of her city on Google Images. I open the first photos that pop up on screen and turn my phone towards her. Atif’s excitement rises in no time as she points at the pictures of all the places that she recognizes: a masjid, a house that reminds her of her own, the big park where she

used to go to when she wanted to clear her head, the railway tracks. She laughs loudly, almost screaming in excitement, as if she could not believe to be having access to fragments of her hometown through the screen of my phone. Hers, however, is a fleeting and nuanced iteration of joy: in fact, one destined to dwindle soon, covered as it gets by the thick veil of painful nostalgia, which crops up in her facial expressions, her sighs, and her remarks about how much she misses Pakistan, her hometown more than any other place. Those places that Atif was so used to traverse – the restaurants where she would go get her food, the streets where she would race her friends on her bike or in borrowed cars – are now only available to her through flat, stock-like images put by someone else on the internet, and by the proxy-like approximation of her past routinary eating-out habits that she tries to reenact and spatially project into her current life in Rome. A bittersweet consolation, which accurately sums up Atif's ambivalent relationality with the city of Rome in and of itself: she loves Rome – as she tells me one day, Rome is the city where she has finally found her *sukūn* (lit. 'tranquility', 'peace') (field-notes, 01/25) –, but this does not prevent her from grieving the loss of her past life in Pakistan: a life that, albeit interspersed by iterations of heteronormative violence of the direst kinds, did not lack its temporal, spatial, as well as culinary pockets of joy²¹⁰.

At this stage of the discussion, the point I most wish to emphasize of the episode recounted above is one about the role that place, emplaced actions, as well as place-conscious movements all play, both in the unfolding of Atif's personal mundanity of life-in-migration, as well as in the broader development of the present research in and of itself. In fact, place gets spontaneously activated first and foremost by Atif, and then re-activated, methodologically, within the purview of fieldwork conduction. First of all, Atif's moving and emplaced actions – her careful choice to alternate between two specific restaurants, as well as her words and behaviors inside these restaurants – imbue otherwise anonymous, ordinary places with unprecedented sets of meaning, which only exist, phenomenologically, as co-ingredients to Atif's individuality. Consequently yet coterminously, this process also determines the emergence of narratives – and memories, affects, and emotive reactions – that to such places attach, which would have remained hidden, had they not been solicited in and through place itself. Even more crucially for the development of research, had not this solicitation been noticed right as it was unfolding. It is in this sense that sensory *a-where-ness* works (Sand, Skovbjerg and Tanggaard, 2022): to the extent to which it allows research to grasp the coingredience of participants and places (Casey, 2001), first, and to harness it as an ethnographic tool, second (Anderson, 2004). When looked at from this optics, then, the fried-chicken shop stops serving as the random background for a conversation about Atif's past, which could have happened anywhere else in Rome. It rather becomes,

²¹⁰ I do not want to linger on the details of such violences, both psychological and physical in nature. Suffice it to say, here, that they included insults, beatings, and rape, at the hands of family, strangers, as well as the police.

instead, the producer of the conversation itself: of the memories that the conversation contains and then further solicits in turn. In other words, the fried-chicken shop – the planned, affectively-loaded movements between the two specific fried-chicken shops near the station, to be more precise – becomes what Alain de Botton (2002, quoted in Anderson, 2004, p. 258) calls, evocatively, “a midwife of thought”. However, what I want to further suggest here is that, even if we were to leave aside for a moment the narratives that such places generate, Atif’s choice to alternate between the two places – of moving between the two restaurants in question – already constitutes, in and of itself, a narrative moment: an embodied and moving narrative, rather than one conventionally articulated through words, but a narrative nonetheless. If anything, in fact, words, together with the memories they give voice to in my presence, make further explicit something that was already contained in the fact of movement in and of itself: in an emplaced, moving choice, which carries meaning exactly to the extent to which it produces the affective remapping of Atif’s Pakistani hometown onto Atif’s new town in migration. Casey’s (2001) reflections come in handy again here. He writes (p. 687):

When I inhabit a place—whether by moving through it or staying in it—I have it in my actional purview. I also hold it by virtue of being in its ambience: first in my body as it holds onto the place by various sensory and kinesthetic means, then in my memory as I “hold it in mind.” This is how the durability of habitus is expressed: by my tenacious holding onto a place so as to prolong what I experience beyond the present moment. In this way, place and self actively collude.

It is, then, exactly in the re-inscription of her Pakistani spatial, affective, and culinary cartography onto a similarly positioned Roman one that Atif’s “tenacious holding onto a place” (ibid.) occurs, and, with it, also the collusion between her own self and place tout court. What started off as a small, seemingly unremarkable moment of fieldwork – one among many other pauses of idleness between one meaningful set of ‘findings’ and the next, someone could even argue – proves to constitute, instead, one of the core components of fieldwork as a whole: an affectively-loaded exercise in emplaced re-inscription enacted by Atif, whereby the mundane act of alternating between two fast-food joints in Rome becomes a tool to try and reenact, in migration, a past, now-made-unreachable time and place in Pakistan. Ultimately, then, it is through this complex, yet at the same time also extremely simple, operation that place shows its functioning as an actual research tool in and of itself: as it is first activated by Atif, and as it gets subsequently harnessed in research, via both Atif’s sensory *a-where-ness* and my own.

Needless to say, once this *a-where-ness* gets activated, it does not remain confined to the bounded space of the single episode recounted here so far: to the few meters and couple of roads separating the two fast-food joints that Atif and I start orbiting around, from that hot June afternoon onwards. Instead, it crosses over many other research-related avenues, some of which still involve Atif, and

others which, instead, do not. When it comes to further subsets of the memory- and culinary-driven meanderings that Atif and I share around Rome, for instance, fried-chicken soon starts to be joined by another of Atif's favorites – soon enough, a favorite of mine, too: biryani. It is in search for the most homely-tasting version of the meal, that Atif and I end up becoming regulars of another Roman neighborhood, sometimes referred to as Rome's 'Banglatown': Torpignattara (see Pompeo, 2011; Priori, 2010). More specifically, of a local Bangladeshi restaurant, the tables of which turn into yet another site for the unfolding of the present research, together with the walking/commuting routes that Atif and I routinely start to cover to reach the place. Suffice it to think, in this regard, that many of the narratives, information, and insights about Atif scattered all throughout this thesis, I gathered while walking and/or sitting in the bus on our way to the restaurant; directly while eating our biryani there; or, even, while waiting for our order or the bill to arrive (see early on in this thesis, the concluding remarks of Chapter Two, Section 2.3.1.).

As anticipated, however, such a dynamic does not get reproduced by Atif alone. Something incredibly similar to our orbiting around the fried-chicken shops recur, in fact, also with another participant: Shanto. Having found himself living in a small, provincial Italian town, which he makes no secret of hating with a passion, Shanto finds his own emplaced strategies to rebuild around himself the sense of homeliness that only certain spaces inside the city of Dhaka once managed to afford him. At least once each time we meet, Shanto invites me to sit in a terrace café located at the top of a tall commercial building in his small Italian hometown²¹¹. This spot – one where Shanto can get a glimpse of the city's roofs and streets from above, people-watch, and take photos of strangers and birds passing and flying by – becomes the theatre of some of our most meaningful exchanges, some of which I record, and others that I only take note of afterwards in my diaries. In this case, too, it does not take long for the meanings behind Shanto's reiterated presence in that one carefully-picked place to begin speaking well beyond his own words. As he explains to me one day, the reason why he repeatedly asks me to meet in the café is, simply enough, because its upper-floor, terraced, and lofty-like space is his favorite place in all of the, otherwise dull, Italian town that he has found himself living in. And it is so, because it is the closest thing he could find to the fancy café where he used to spend long chunks of time back in Dhaka: a place where he would go to work, drink his beloved coffee beverages, or, simply enough, timepass with friends or alone, while people-watching and clicking pictures – incidentally, the very last place that he visited before boarding the plane to Europe. In Shanto's case, too, then, the place of choice for our meetings becomes much more than just the neutral background for our lengthy and often-messy conversations. It comes to constitute, instead, yet another attempt at approximating one affect-loaded, beloved geography – currently made unavailable to him by life-in-

²¹¹ This happens several times throughout a timespan that ranges from June 2023 to March 2025.

migration – on top of a much more despised one: i.e., Italy, the only geography that migration has granted Shanto access to. To an extent, Shanto’s emplaced choice thus ends up telling me more – or, at least, more deeply – about Shanto’s relationality to both Italy and Dhaka, than his trajectory of SOGI asylum migration and consequent SOGI refugee status do. It provides corpus, rather than solely background, to his words, thus allowing to add thick layers of meaning to Shanto’s memories, frustrations, and aspirations in migration. In other words, just like the two fried-chicken shops did in the case of Atif, the terraced café, too, becomes both producer *and* product of Shanto’s life- and migration-stories, via the occupational strategies that he regularly enacts, both when I am there with him to witness and partake in them directly, as well as when I leave the field and can only attempt to get some glimpses of them from afar – from the pictures that he regularly posts on social media, for instance.

In conclusion, as the vignettes briefly retraced in this section wanted to illustrate, within the purview of the present im/mobile research, place becomes an element that is, and cannot not be, both thematical and methodological at the same time. An element whose meaning stays the most alive exactly to the extent to which its thematical and methodological impulses co-constitute each other, and ultimately blur into one another. It always was, and at the same time was not, all about Atif’s love for fried chicken.

3.3.2. Of Window-Shopping Sprees, Allusive Glances, and Fantasies of Domesticity: Normal Attachments in Migration and the Limits of ‘Queer’

A proper apprehension of participants’ relationalities to place, on the one hand, and of place’s relationality to the methodological apparatus of research, on the other, cannot be exhausted via the brief, albeit significant, discussion of participants’ emplaced decisions that I started to carry out in the previous section of this work. Rather than staying confined to place alone, I want to suggest here, such an apprehension should rather be integrated with further subsets of analysis, more specifically attuned to the fact of movement in and of itself (see Creswell, 2010), as well as to the role that movement plays, in turn, within the broader affective, thematical, and methodological economy of research. Most of the time throughout the unfolding of my fieldwork endeavors, movement manifested via the simple and routinary act of walking: it took shape, in other words, as my interlocutors and I walked together, more or less aimlessly, while also engaging in the most varied sets of conversations which walking either solicited or made easier for us to endure. Relevantly enough, this walking-induced elicitation happened for reasons that are partly serendipitous, partly inseparable from the nature of walking itself, and partly more closely linked to participants’ peculiar living conditions as closeted, sexually/gender defiant migrants in Italy – an element, the latter, which would require them to, quite

literally, *walk away* from prying eyes and ears before they could be able to start talking. Sam, for instance, repeatedly took me walking in what he referred to as “the jungle” (fieldnotes, 11/23; 04/24): the open, tree-lined countryside extending at the outskirts of the small town where his SAI facility was located, and eventually leading to the banks of a large river, where we would sit and keep our chatting sessions going. It was during our solitary walks to the river – which would start off easy, and then grow slightly more arduous, through the mud and the unkept bushes, our eyes locked to the ground – that I got to hear Sam opening up about some of the most intimate facets of his life, as they had been unfolding both before and after his migration move out of Pakistan: about his often-troubled sets of relationships with himself and his sexuality, with his family, and with his friends and lovers, both in Italy and in Pakistan (for a more thorough apprehension of Sam’s story, see Chapter Two, Section 2.2.). In fact, almost everything that I learned and then written about Sam, I learned walking. Far from being inconsequential, then, the act of “going along” (Kusenbach, 2003) my interlocutors, of “talking whilst walking” (Anderson, 2004, p. 254) with them, soon enough proved to be yet another incredibly rich and nuanced juncture of research: one which ended up turning both the places and the objects that our walks directed us to, and/or made us orbit around, as well as the act of walking in and of itself, into additional, precious components of this project.

The value of ‘walking’ as both a theme and method for research has not gone unnoticed in academic literature – not in geography, nor in anthropology, or in works on qualitative methods more broadly –, with scholarship variously conceptualizing these techniques as “go-alongs” (Kusenbach, 2003), “talking whilst walking” (Anderson, 2004; see also Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), sensory and affective modes of knowing (Pink, 2015), as well as, simply enough, “mobile methods”, (Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011; Salazar, 2019). At this point of the discussion, however, I am still to properly address walking in and of itself – the same ‘walking’ that this entire chapter is titled after, in fact – through such lenses. So far, I only did so metaphorically – in terms of participants’ ‘walking out’ of Italy’s system of *accoglienza* (Section 3.2.2.), and ‘walking beyond’ the discursive borders of refugeeness (Section 3.2.3.) –, or phenomenologically, to the extent to which walking constituted, more than anything else, a means to reach a peculiarly meaningful, affect-loaded place, made to be, in turn, the center of analysis (Section 3.3.1.). Here in this section, I thus want to shift the attention primarily to walking in and of itself, understood again via its double-edged valence as both a theme of, and a method for, ethnographic research. I want to do so because this composed act of moving-cum-narrating – of walking while talking/listening – provides yet another set of openings into facets of participants’ lives that would have remained opaque, had they not been activated via narrative-in-motion, and, more specifically, via the shared togetherness that the latter rests upon. In the

introduction to their *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008, p.1) lay out the relational potential inherent in walking as an ethnographic tool as follows:

Our principal contention is that walking is a profoundly social activity: that in their timings, rhythms and inflections, the feet respond as much as does the voice to the presence and activity of others. Social relations, we maintain, are not enacted in situ but are paced out along the ground.

As Jon Anderson (2004, p. 254) also puts it, “conversations held whilst walking through a place have the potential to generate a collage of collaborative knowledge”: something that several of the fields that I found myself, quite literally, waking in – and out, and around – with my interlocutors show particularly well.

Before tackling some of the epistemological openings that such a mobile act produced within this research, I once again want to let fieldwork speak for itself first. I will now thus proceed to introduce two distinct episodes, in which I found myself ethnographically ‘walking the talk’ – two out of many others, in fact – in the company of Atif and Sam, respectively. More specifically, in the analysis that will follow, I will rely on them both to highlight how the combination of narrative and movement – better yet, narrative-in-movement – can be tapped into to uncover another critical juncture of this research: one that I did already start to unpack in the previous chapter, but that surely deserves further analysis. I am referring to the partial inadequacy of ‘queer’ and ‘queerness’ as epistemological and methodological lenses to be deployed against the backdrop of the present research context, which an up-close attunement to participants’ everyday, via walking, made particularly evident. Theirs is an inadequacy that emerges with particular strength when such lenses are apprehended, via their historical-political genealogy, less as simple signposts of gender/sexual defiance, than as properly political banners, rooted, as such, in far-reaching claims to anti-normativity. As the following walking/emplaced narratives will contribute to illustrate, within the specific context of this research, such anti-normative aspirations can paradoxically prove to be heuristically more limiting than enabling in their scopes and outcomes: more in tune with the beliefs of who conducts research, than with those of participants themselves. Against this backdrop, then, walking itself will be deployed as a privileged tool to recalibrate the ethnographic attention back to participants and the materiality of their everyday lives.

Field Diary Excerpt #1: Atif

April 21, 2024.

Atif and I are strolling together on our way to the station, when she asks me to enter a home goods store that we encounter halfway. Once inside, we idly roam around the isles for a bit, with Atif pointing at all the plates, glasses, and pans that she likes the most: she will buy all of these things once she has a house of her own, she declares.

[...]

Before reaching the station, we stop at another department store along the way, which mostly sells clothes, accessories, and personal care products. Atif is looking for a make-up base to buy – which is completely different from foundation, she duly explains to me –, but ends up spending most of the time looking at the jewelry exhibitors instead. We go through many different kinds of earrings, rings, and necklaces, checking out the price of each and always putting it back because “*kitnā mahaṅgā hai yeh!*” (lit. “how expensive this is!”). We also quickly tour the clothes section: summer is approaching and Atif needs some new tops, she says. She takes up a couple of women’s shirts that she likes, but predictably ends up putting them back. She’ll go buy stuff at the Chinese market [*sic*] where everything is much cheaper, she concludes.

[...]

When we finally reach the station, Atif admits that she is tired and wants to go home. I tell her not to worry and go: while I wait to meet a friend later that evening, I will keep myself busy by doing some more “window shopping” – a formula that, by then, has already become an inside joke between the two of us²¹². Upon hearing my plan, however, Atif changes her mind and decides to join me for the last leg of our stores-tour of the day – the densest one. We reach the station’s shopping area and begin tackling one shop after another. We first enter a relatively cheap makeup store, where she briefly tries again to find a base, but to no avail. When we pass in front of another bigger and way fancier beauty shop, Atif points at it and says something along the lines of: “*Voh [dukān] bahut mahaṅgī hai! Chalo, vahān chaltē hain!*” (lit. “That [store] is very expensive! Let’s go there!”)²¹³. Once inside, we start out our tour by theatrically displaying our shock at the prices of the make-up items on display, to then do the same thing in the perfume aisle, where we begin to try out all the testers we can find, starting off from the women’s section and then moving on to the men’s. Each time Atif doesn’t like a

²¹² The one retraced in the fieldnotes excerpt above was not the first, and most certainly not the last, window-shopping session that Atif and I have engaged in together. It was for sure one of the earliest ones, but even now, whenever we meet and find each other spending time together, especially if inside the station, we do not miss the chance to resort to our usual routine.

²¹³ This quotation is not verbatim: as I was not audio-recording the interaction, it is based on notes taken shortly afterwards. It does aim to reproduce the general sense and wording of the exchange as faithfully as possible, though it cannot claim complete accuracy.

scent – which happens quite often –, she makes an exaggerated grim and lets out sounds of disgust, adding up to our already rather theatrical pantomime of shock and astonishment for the highly-priced items around us. After that, we move on to a shop that only sells extravagant food items – mostly imported sweets, junk food, and peculiar items not easily available in regular supermarkets – they, too, definitively overpriced. Atif picks up a pocket-sized jar of Nutella and tells me that she eats it every day, even with her fingers. She has become Italian, then, I joke, and she replies that, indeed, lately she has started appreciating and eating Italian food more than she used to before. We then enter yet another store that exclusively sells phone covers and accessories – she makes me ask for the price of a charger, which is, however, predictably too high –, and finally, as a last stop, an eyewear store. Atif wants to buy blue colored lenses, but after waiting for a few minutes without being served, she decides to leave: they were going to be too expensive anyway.

On top of the pantomimed reactions that we jokingly exchange with each other inside the stores, on the short way from one shop to another, Atif puts up an additional play with me about our window-shopping experience: “We spent so much money and bought so many things! Where will we even put them?”²¹⁴ – she theatrically begins to complain of, accompanying her ironic words with exaggerated gestures and hand movements in perfect rich aunty style (see Khubchandani, 2022), not a single shopping bag in sight – “They weren’t too expensive for us! We could even buy more! We will buy more!”²¹⁵ And similar other exclamations, which evidently clash with the reality of looking-without-buying invariably characterizing our window-shopping sprees. It takes me a moment to figure out the spirit of the game, but once I do I go along with it. At first, it seems to me that she is pretending to have spent too much money, but I soon realize that the meaning of this *nāṭak* (lit. ‘stage-play’, ‘drama’, but also ‘scene’ as in: ‘making a scene’) is virtually the opposite: all the money that we spent meant nothing to us, because we are so rich that such a shopping spree is basically routine and doesn’t impact us at all. We keep the performance alive for a while, until we laugh it off, say goodbye, and go our separate ways: Atif back to her reception camp, and I to meet my friend.

Field Diary Excerpt #2: Sam

February 23, 2025

Sam and I have decided to meet in the nearest big city to the otherwise small and rather isolated town where he has moved after leaving his SAI camp (see also Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3.; Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.). After walking back and forth around the city center for a good while, we decide

²¹⁴ Similarly to how clarified above, this exchange was not audio-recorded. The whole exchange took place in Urdu, and it is reconstructed from fieldnotes written immediately afterwards in English translation. The quotations above seek to render the sense of Atif’s words as faithfully as possible, though not verbatim.

²¹⁵ The same explanation provided in the previous footnote applies here, too.

to move towards a famous scenic bridge, one of the city's main touristic attractions. Once we cross the bridge and find ourselves on the other side of the river, we realize that we have entered a new, completely different part of town, very neat and gracious indeed: a residential area consisting of a set of row-lined, small cottage-like houses, which face directly the river and the city center unfolding right behind it. Sam and I keep on walking around these houses for quite a bit, Sam entirely captivated by their courtyards and homely entrances. While checking them one by one, he repeatedly wonders out loud whether, among them, there might be one out for sale, how much a house in that area might cost, and how lovely it must be to live there. He begins, in other words, to form for himself an imagined dimension of domesticity in that exact area of the city, in one of those cute river-side houses that we are passing by during an otherwise rather aimless walk. He gets so engrossed in this figuration that, once we go back to the city center and decide to go sit inside a café to shield ourselves from the winter cold, he immediately begins to roam real estate websites to check whether some of those houses are actually for sale, and, if so, how much they cost. Indeed, for the last few months, Sam has been consistently on the lookout for a house to buy: a place where to go live permanently and autonomously, finally on his own. He has even considered buying a small property – basically a ruin – for a modest amount of money in an isolated village up the mountains, but eventually could not complete the plan due to some issues with the building that were the owner's to fix. He is thus left fantasizing, more or less realistically, about his property-owing future plans.

While Atif and I and Sam and I walk and talk, together, the streets, the shops, and the neighborhoods of some of the cities in which their lives get to unfold in Italy, our movements in space produce, coterminously, the materialization of other sets of trajectories: trajectories often more temporal than spatial in nature, and very much related to both Atif and Sam's visions of their futures and/or alternative presents, in the aftermaths of their migration journeys from Pakistan to Italy. By entering a shop and pointing at the utensils that she dreams of one day buying for her future home (Atif); by lingering to peek at other people's houses, hoping to be able to buy one for himself someday soon (Sam); by pacing the station's crowded shopping area, while temporarily impersonating a rich woman whose only concern is the lack of space in which to keep all the expensive things that she has (not) bought (Atif again): in other words, by walking through places, and, via walking, by inscribing in everyday places and objects projections of their affective, intimate selves, Atif and Sam confer to their yearnings a substance, which is both material and affective, spatial and temporal in nature (see Pérez Murcia and Boccagni, 2022; Svašek, 2012). Additionally, by walking with them where they want to walk,

and stopping with them where they want to stop, I become privy, in turn, to thick additional layers of Atif and Sam's life-stories (Eastmond, 1996), which would have most likely remained opaque, had I stuck to simpler and less mobile, albeit perhaps more orderly and systematic, interviewing techniques (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.2.). It is, in fact, exactly in the sociality of walking and stopping together (see Ingold and Vergunst, 2008), rather than in shared words alone, that I get to apprehend the texture of their desires in their actual granularity. Standing out among those is, no doubt, the extent to which both Atif and Sam ardently wish to be able to afford a place of their own: a house that they can furnish however they like, and where they can finally live in tranquility, after years of sharing privacy-free reception camps and rented rooms with migration companions, acquaintances, or friends, more or less privy to their sexual/gender defiance, and more or less understanding of it. A desire so strong that Sam goes as far as to start imagining his life in an area of the city that he had never even visited before, led to do so by the aura of calm, welcoming domesticity that the river-facing neighborhood emanates. When it comes to Atif, instead, it is, again, in walking and stopping along her that I am additionally lead towards, and around, material tokens of a broader apparatus of longed-for femininity, which, albeit already part and parcel of Atif's interiority, cannot be properly embodied and displayed in all of its glory yet: make-up items, clothes, perfumes, colored-lenses, which get only looked at, picked up and put back on the shelves, but never bought; objects that, by virtue of their indexical relation to a coveted, idealized realm of the feminine, are made into the mandatory stops of the reiterated window-shopping sprees that Atif and I engage in, together, usually after having consumed our weekly share of affect-loaded fried chicken and fries (see early on in this chapter, Section 3.3.1.).

Interestingly enough, as the first vignette traced above shows, Atif's activation of her coingredience (Casey, 2001; see also Anderson, 2004) to places and objects-in-places is also one that comes with an additional nuance, closer to self-mockery, than to yearning pure and simple. In fact, I want to argue, the added layer of irony that Atif invests her longings with, through the enactment of an impromptu performance of wealthy womanhood – an imaginative walking and dress-less 'drag show', it could be argued – is what facilitates, for her, the bearing of her own desires: desires which would have otherwise been too painful to sustain. It is, in other words, the thing that opens up a spatial and temporal pocket where Atif can pose as the rich woman that she might never become, but that at the same time she also already is, right there and then, at the moment of the impersonation that she puts up – once again without a proper stage, and for one spectator/acting-companion only (i.e., me) (see Chapter Two, Section 2.3.). Additionally, the same thing that renders bearable the current absence, in her, of the right amount of money and right nuance of gender – two of the things that she covets the

most – exactly to the extent to which they are both being made also the object of mockery, rather than solely the object of desire.

By taking up Atif’s performance as the cue to move the discussion forward and towards its conclusions, here I want to advance the following suggestion: on top of testifying to the wittiness of her character, the simultaneity of longing and mocking in Atif’s walking, dress-less ‘drag show’ is also one that begins to complicate the possibility to simplistically bend her posture as to either straightforwardly fit assimilationist aspirations to normativity – as in: she very normatively wants a house and a husband and good-quality make-up and nice clothes and blue eyes –, or, alternatively, to signal outright rebellion against this same apparatus of normativity – as in: she is making fun of it, by bending it from within through a queer and campy performance. This is a complication that, I want to suggest from here onwards, not only can be extended to apply to more people besides Atif, both in this research and beyond it; but also one that can additionally open up the space for a broader critique of some theorizations of antinormativity that lie at the core of queer theory itself, and that, as such, consequently often drift into queer migration studies as well (see also Chapter Four, Section 4.2.1.). Indeed, discussions about the relationship between queer theory and antinormativity provide fuel to a debate that has been going on, unsolved, for years: one that, with Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson (2015, p. 1), can be effectively summarized via the question “can queer theorizing proceed without a primary commitment to antinormativity?”²¹⁶. Instead of tackling the issue in its entirety – an enterprise well beyond the scope and capacity of the present work –, here in the remaining portion of the chapter, I will instead attempt a first entrance into this strand of critique, by limiting its focus to issues more tightly related to the bounded space of this research: to the implications, risks, and limitations, that is to say, that come with projecting specific expectations of political, antinormative queerness upon people to whom both ‘queer’ in and of itself, as well as ‘antinormativity’, may make little to no sense, from an ethnographic, political, but also affective and aesthetic point of view.

Moving in an analogous direction to the one I have just started delineating, in her eloquently titled paper “Who’s Queer? What’s Queer?”, anthropologist Ellen Lewin (2016, p. 598) sets out to explore “the utility of queer nomenclature for understanding the lives of many real-world people with non-heteronormative sexual or gender identities and presentations”. In doing so, her broader aim is to test the limits, within the field of ‘queer anthropology’, of what she identifies as queer theory’s pervasive prescriptivism of resistance, especially when it comes to conducting ethnographic work, duly and properly: work that, by definition, should be attuned to the lives and worldviews of the people who

²¹⁶ As already anticipated in-text, the debate hinted at here is incredibly vast, and only tangential to the discussion being carried out across these pages. Among the many nuances that it takes across different scholarly avenues, a very compelling insight on the vast theme of queerness, normativity, and its opposites, proposed with specific reference to the South Asian context, can be found in J. Daniel Luther’s 2023 book *Queering Normativity and South Asian Public Culture: Wrong Readings Only*.

are being written about, but that, according to Lewin, a firm faith in queer epistemology often risks bending to an abiding theoretical-political rationale of resistance and anti/non-normativity, which – however noble its intents may be – ends up serving the researcher’s socio-political interests, way more than participants’. Indeed, much work in queer anthropology, Lewin (2016, p. 604) laments, “assumes that queerness unquestionably resides in visible, intentional, and effective subversions of mainstream cultural norms and the related expectation that explicit and palpable transgression is the only sort of queerness worthy of the name”. According to the scholar, this assumption limits, first and foremost, the interpretative capacities of the ethnographer, while also trivializing participants’ experiences into moral scales of queerness, radicality, and antinormativity, whereby ‘nonnormative’ equals ‘good’, and ‘normative’ equals ‘bad’. Even more problematically, however, it tightens the scope of action of the discipline of queer anthropology itself, reconfiguring it as a field that can or should reach only those people who – as paradoxical as it may sound – manage to fit the standards of radical antinormativity so dear to queer theory ‘proper’: in other words, people who are deemed to be queer enough, and the right kind of queer, already from the outset (see Lewin, 2016).

Interestingly enough, were they to be measured against analogous scalar understandings of anti-normative queerness to those contested by Lewin (*ibid.*), virtually all of the people who consented to take part in this research would fail to qualify as ‘proper’ subjects of ‘queer anthropology’. In fact, none of them explicitly embraces queer politics, or even something that resembles it; some of them even despise being read, and reading themselves, as gay/non-straight in the first place, and instead crave the level of anonymity that only heteronormativity can come with. Even more so, they all more or less explicitly nurture aspirations and desires that leave little to no room at all for queer interpretation. The two vignettes provided above illuminate this juncture particularly well: Atif and Sam’s desires – as they emerge, coalescing around places, objects, and actions, which get activated, in turn, through shared go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003) and talking-whilst-walking sessions (Anderson, 2004; see also Ingold and Vergunst, 2008) – almost invariably prove to be oriented towards spheres of domesticity, fixity, and ‘normality’, which have very little to share with the ideal of queerness as a banner for radicality and political subversion, so central to classic iterations of queer theory (see e.g. Warner, 1993). That is to say, they bear little resemblance to queer “as a political metaphor without a fixed referent” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, 2005), and rather respond, more simplistically, to ‘queer’ as a cipher for sexual or gender defiance, sometimes lived and embraced from within, other times refused, other times again forcefully attributed to them by others. What I want to argue here, however, is that if we are to make sense of, and do justice to, participants’ material lives, experiences, and desires, ethnographically, an alternative assemblage to queer theory becomes necessary in this context: an assemblage that takes seriously Lewin’s (2016) critique of the prescriptivism of resistance

inherent in queer theory itself, but that also eventually moves beyond it. Crucially, a framework that remains in tune with what people actually *want*, and with what they have to do to get it. And not because this wanting shall become, in turn, a signpost of either normativity or resistance, which will be only for the researcher to condemn or endorse. But rather, because it is a wanting that speaks, as simply as it may sound, of existence tout court: of those material, mundane, at times trivial specs of existence, that make up the stuff of ethnography itself, and of everything that precedes it, follows it, and animates it from within.

Coming back to the walking, yet emplaced life-stories of Sam and Atif, what emerges from them is that what they do want is, indeed, fairly simple, if not outright ‘normal’ and ‘normative’: a house, a family, more money than what they are managing to earn; in Atif’s specific case, nice makeup and clothing items, and a pair of brand-new blue eyes, too. No doubt, all wants and needs that, if apprehended through a rigid and abiding faith in queerness-as-antinormativity, might be easily dismissed as politically dubious aspirations to heteronormative assimilation. What I want to suggest here, however, is that their normativity-facing orientation, in and of itself, deserves to be accorded a different reading: not only one hopefully more compassionate, but also more in tune with the material realities that these wants and needs stem from, and point at. In my foregrounding of this analytic of ‘wanting’ normativity, over one of opposing it, I am drawing profound inspiration from the incisive, at times caustic arguments presented by Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager in their 2019 paper “After Trans Studies”. In a conversation that is both hopeful and mournful, angry and funny at the same time, the two scholars discuss the uncertain future of trans studies as a field of academic enquiry. Because of its increasing conflation with queer theory, they argue, trans studies is currently suffering from an obsessive attachment to antinormativity: one not too dissimilar from the one that Lewin (2016) diagnoses queer anthropology with, but that, in the specific case of the former, comes at a particularly enhanced cost, first and foremost, for trans people themselves. As Emmet Harsin Drager (Chu and Drager, 2019, pp. 107-108) underscores, it is, in fact, “an obsession with resistance and radicality that has severely limited our ability to fully understand trans pasts and presents”. Because of a long history of nosy, if not outright exploitative, incursions of queer theory into both trans *studies* and trans *lives* (for a thorough critique of queer theory’s exploitation of transness, see Namaste, 1998; Prosser, 2000), they continue, it feels like antinormativity – and, even more so, the expectation that the trans body be the epitome of antinormativity – has now become a political imperative for the field: one that is surely appealing to trans studies as an academic project, but perhaps much less so to living, breathing trans people themselves (Drager and Chu, 2019). Something crucial is, in fact, lost along the (academically-sanctioned) way of turning trans people into banners of political radicality and subversion, and that is nothing other than trans people’s *desires*: what trans people want, concretely,

in their daily lives, as well as what they need; their material and affective worlds and aspirations, especially when these manifest as attachments to the norm, rather than as explicit attempts at subverting it (ibid.). To put it bluntly, then, the question that Chu and Drager compel their reader to face is whether the trans body even wants the antinormativity that is constantly being attached onto her, on the sole basis of a forceful understanding of transness as an emanation of queerness – the queerest possible emanation of queerness, in fact. Andrea Long Chu (Chu and Drager, 2019, p. 107) does not hesitate to answer this question with a caustic, yet brilliant provocation:

ALC: And it's no accident, I'd add, that the transsexual is the only thing that trans can describe that queer can't. The transsexual is not queer; this is the best thing about her. Take Agnes, the pseudonymous transsexual woman who famously posed as intersex at UCLA's Gender Identity Clinic in the late fifties in order to obtain access to vaginoplasty. Agnes's case was chronicled by Harold Garfinkel ([1967] 2006) in an article that's now taught in trans studies courses. (It's the sixth entry in *The Transgender Studies Reader*.) Agnes is regularly celebrated as some kind of gender ninja: savvy, tactical, carefully conning the medical-industrial complex into giving her what she wants (see, e.g., Preciado [2008] 2013: 380–89). What no one wants to talk about is what she actually wanted: a cunt, a man, a house, and normal fucking life. Whatever intuition she may not have had about gender as a “managed achievement” was put toward a down payment on a new dishwasher (Garfinkel 1967). If there's anything Agnes “reveals” about gender, it's that actually existing normativity is, strictly speaking, impossible. Norms, as such, do not exist. (If *Gender Trouble* knew this, it did a poor job explaining it.)⁴ That doesn't mean that norms don't structure people's desires; what it means is that the desire for the norm consists, in terms of its lived content, in *nonnormative attempts at normativity*. Agnes was a nonnormative subject, but that wasn't because she was “against” the norm; on the contrary, *her nonnormativity was what wanting to be normal actually looked like*. Like most of us, Agnes was making do in the gap between what she wanted and what wanting it got her.

Although emerging from, and speaking to, scholarly, political, and embodied contexts well distinct from the one that the present work addresses, the intervention reported above nonetheless contains what I believe can become one of the most relevant interpretative keys for accessing the ethnographic contexts across which this research, too, unfolds. In fact, not unlike ‘the transgender’ (singular), the ‘queer migrant’ (also singular) – bravely and rebelliously crossing, as she does, the borders of both the normative sexual/gendered body and of the nation-state²¹⁷ – can easily be turned into the perfect banner of antinormative and antiestablishment political agendas, no doubt noble in intent, but also potentially detached from the concrete materiality of the lives, desires, and aspirations of sexual/queer migrants' themselves. Detached, for instance, from where people go and where they do not go, and from what they want and what they do not want. And indeed, if we are to follow Chu's invitation, and attend closely to what Sam and Atif want, a “normal fucking life” (Chu and Drager, 2019, p. 107) is

²¹⁷ As Tim Cresswell (2006), among others, reminds us, the association between movement and subversion is far from new in fields as vast as postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and feminist thought (see e.g. Braidotti, 2011).

perhaps the best, most accurate way to capture it. By this, I do not mean to suggest that queerness and antinormativity are completely alien to their lives as they unfold through migration – in fact, it would have been perhaps even easier, for me, to *queer* (verb) their lives here: to frame them as exemplary of queer transgression, rather than restore this sense of ‘normality’ to their existences. And yet, by fully embracing Chu’s framing, I deem it much more relevant to point out one crucial aspect, which tends instead to be erased from all those academic and/or activist readings that take up queer migrants as utmost emblems of resistance: the fact, that is, that “their nonnormativity [is] what wanting to be normal actually look[s] like” (ibid.). In other words, antinormativity does not necessarily belong to the purview of their aspirations and socio-political beliefs; it is, rather, the factual appearance that their attempts at ‘normality’ take on, carried out, as those are, from the complexly marginalized positionality of racialized, sexually/gender defiant migrants in contemporary Italy, that they find themselves inhabiting. In fact, Sam, Atif, Shanto, Muneeb – in one way or another, all the people that I have been engaging with, throughout the conduction of this research – are, each via their own modality, making do “in the gap between what [they] wanted and what wanting it got them”. This gap is, in a way, the space itself where this research has been unfolding.

Once again, with that, I do not want to exhaust my interlocutor’s desires and aspirations into a fatalistic and deterministic interpretation, which deprives marginalized people of the possibility to be ‘radical’ exactly because of their marginality in and of itself. Rather, I want to point out how, in the specific cases analyzed here, desire for the norm is, at the same time, a desire/need for livability – one that does not have to be forcefully read as queer to be seen, apprehended, and valued in the first place –, while the obsessive search, in them, for queerness ‘proper’ might act more as a way to pacify the researcher’s political conscience and position in the queer academy, than as an attunement to people’s lives in and of themselves. The main epistemological issue at stake, then, is not one of diagnosing participants with either antinormativity or normalcy, neither one of subsequently celebrating or condemning one of the two. The point rather is to recognize that the diagnosis itself – the academically-sanctioned drive towards making a diagnosis in the first place – is flawed from the very outset: flawed, that is to say, by an implicit but pervasive association between queerness-subversion-good, and lack of queerness-normativity-bad, which ignores the material conditions that make norms – some norms, at least – very much desirable, rather than simply constraining, to many. When apprehended as such, the distinction itself between what counts as queer and what doesn’t, what counts as normative and what fails to do so, ultimately loses much of its ethnographic and analytical purchase. What, instead, starts to acquire more currency is the capacity of ethnographic analysis itself to remain responsive to how norms are lived, negotiated, inhabited, and even desired, especially from those positions in which full access to normativity remains structurally foreclosed – positions like the one

inhabited by Atif, for instance, and by many others like her: racialized, sexual/gender defiant individuals, jostling the few ups and many downs of migrant life in Italy. To put it simply, then, attending to participants' attachments to home, family, wealth, work, stability, or even beauty, is an operation that ultimately unsettles the expectation that migrant 'queer' lives must be rendered legible primarily through the lens of resistance or radical politics. What emerges, instead, is a field of desires oriented towards normalcy that demand to be read as such: as desires for 'the norm', lived and negotiated from positions where normativity *stricto sensu* remains structurally out of reach (Chu and Drager, 2019; see also Ahmed, 2006). It is precisely in the interstices between wanting and (not) getting that appearances of nonnormativity infiltrate, leaving a trail of effects that are not necessarily wanted nor appreciated, and that, as such, need to be apprehended. Hence, if, as Lewin (2016) cautions against, 'queer' risks obscuring more than it reveals when mobilized as a prescriptive epistemology of resistance – one that serves the researcher's political agenda more than participants' own understandings of their lives and worlds –, this is where I choose to leave 'queer' behind, or at least to suspend it. Not so much 'queer' as a useful rubric to quickly and effectively invoke a wide range of instances of sexual/gender defiance, or, when paired with migration, as a useful academic lens against overwhelmingly straight readings of contemporary mobilities (see Chapter Four, Section 4.2.1.); but more specifically, 'queer' as an analytic of resistance and a political banner, which very much exceeds the realm of gender/sexuality. Importantly, this is not a forever and everywhere move, translatable, as such, in every other avenue of life and research. It is, however, one that I convincingly stand by here, in the limited yet meaningful ethnographic and epistemological space opened up by the present work.

In concluding this section, I want to return one last time to where it all began: to movement, and, more specifically, to walking, understood as both a theme and method for research. Temporarily set aside for the sake of the epistemological digression carried out so far, this mobile theme-method is now ready to reenter the frame. What I want to suggest here is, in fact, the following: it is exactly when reread in light of the arguments developed above – about the ethnographic limitations of queer as a heuristic for the present research – that walking-as-method acquires renewed analytical value. More specifically, by situating the researcher within the actual, moving mundanity of participants' everyday trajectories, an act as simple as walking-with and/or talking whilst walking can become a precious safeguard against the projection, onto participants' lives, of programmatic visions of queerness that with such lives barely match. An act, that is to say, that enables a more careful and ethnographically attuned engagement with the actual texture that 'queer' itself takes on in the field, instead: one in which participants' desires and aspirations, wants and needs, are not stretched out to the point of deformity, just so that they can fit a politically nonnormative mold; but are rather apprehended in

their own terms, as lived, ever-unfolding negotiations with norms which are simultaneously desired, inhabited, structurally denied, and/or forcefully imposed.

CHAPTER FOUR: MIGRATING

4.1. Introduction, I. Migration, At Last

After having discussed, respectively in Chapter Two (Gesturing) and Chapter Three (Walking), the movements happening *within* participants' bodies, and the movements *of* participants' bodies happening in and through space in the aftermath of migration, this fourth and last ethnographic chapter will be devoted to the broadest among the scales of im/mobility that traverse and shape this research: to the one most easily and most immediately identifiable as pertaining to a project that deals, first and foremost, with the life-stories (Eastmond, 1996, p. 235) of 'queer' people relocating from South Asia to Italy. I am talking about migration – about transnational sexual/queer migration, to be more precise. Given the centrality that migratory movements hold for the present research – they provide its background, its very own *raison d'être* –, it would have been perhaps more predictable, or even logical, to devote an earlier section of this thesis to a comprehensive theoretical discussion of the theme of migration itself, rather than delaying this moment to the very last chapter of the work. The idea behind swapping the expected order of the discussion was, however, once again to foreground the level of interconnectedness that characterizes different scales of im/mobility, while also questioning the assumption that the macro-scale of migration should necessarily be assumed as the primary, most prominent lens of analysis (see Chapter Two, Section 2.1.). By that, I am not at all implying that sexual/queer migration does not matter as a critical lens tout court. In fact, it already shaped virtually all the discussions carried out so far in this thesis, even before being formally introduced through an orderly and comprehensive theoretical examination. I am rather pointing out the just-as-important, yet often-neglected role that smaller, more mundane, dimensions of im/mobility have, in determining both the unravelling and the outcomes of vast-scale migratory projects (see e.g., Baas, 2016, pp. Creswell, 2006; 2010), as well as the additional part that such movements play within research on migration, not only as themes of investigation, but also as tools to carry out research in the first place (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.).

Having clarified these points, a thorough examination of the theme of mobility *as* migration remains, nonetheless, still in order, and the present chapter will be devoted exactly to that. As it has already been the case for the previous two chapters, however, here, too, what will start off as a meditation strictly on (sexual/queer) migration will soon enough drift away from its main object of analysis, and begin encompassing many other things that (sexual/queer) migration are not, but that will prove, at the same time, also inseparable from (sexual/queer) migration itself. Just as it was not possible to apprehend participants' individual bodily movements without putting them in conversation with much broader scales of im/mobility – with the structural workings of transnational migration and of Italy's machine of migration management (see Collins, 2018; Ghosh, 2017, p. 107; see also

earlier on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.), as well as with the implications of migration itself on strategies for naming and embodying ‘queerness’, among other things (see e.g., Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2017; Mole, 2021) –, my ultimate contention here moves in an analogous direction. That is, that it is not possible to adequately account for the structural workings of sexual/queer migration – including its legal, theoretical, and ethnographic limitations – without contextually looking at it *also* through the micro-lens of participants’ subjective experiences: small interactions, individual or collective desires and aspirations, personal anecdotes and objects, bodily and ideological movements, which develop and circulate across much more reduced scales than the one inbuilt in the primary object of analysis of the chapter – i.e., transnational migration itself –, but through which transnational migration acquires its thickest sets of meaning. What happens once this two-way conversation gets established, then, is that the banner itself of sexual/queer migration is revealed to be a much more layered assemblage of ‘things’ – of discourses, movements, fixities, embodiments, desires, aspirations, delusions, and disappointments – than the formula might seem to hint at: ‘things’ that, crucially enough, cannot be easily and transparently exhausted by that same formula alone. As the following sections will show, both theory and the field will have to come together in active, critical conversation, so that it becomes possible to unpack the ethnographic and thematic density of an assemblage, otherwise destined to remain way too vague and opaque to be truly heuristically functional.

4.2. Introduction, II. *Everything But Queer Migration: Moving towards the Good Life, Perhaps*

When, during one of our first research interactions taking place via a glitchy WhatsApp videocall, I ask Shanto to enumerate to me the three main reasons why he decided to leave Bangladesh for Europe (see Cantú, 2009, p. 131), he confidently answers by repeating the exact same sentence three times, while counting each one of them with his fingers: “To have a better life [finger number one], to have a better life [finger number two], and to have a better life [finger number three]” (fieldnotes, 02/23). Similar insistent manifestations of aspirations to what, via Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 2), can be evoked as “that moral-intimate-economic thing called “the good life”” dot his and other participants’ narrativizations of their migratory projects to Italy (see Carling, 2014). Sometimes taking shape through the lexicon of the ‘European life’, other times through one of ‘freedom’, other times again, as seen above, through that of ‘a better life’ – in yet some other cases, even materializing beyond language itself, through people’s orientations towards, and motions of attachment to, specific places and objects (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.) – vague yet pervasive figurations of allegedly better and freer modalities of inhabiting the world frequently come to lie as the stated core of my interlocutors’ trajectories of mobility, from their homes in the South Asian region to an often otherwise-unspecified

elsewhere in Europe. An elsewhere which, to set the record straight, is hardly ever planned to be Italy from the start. ‘Better life’, ‘European life’, ‘freedom’: these are all opaque, yet thick invocations of different some-things and some-where, whose material textures and contents invariably exceed the lexical façade of each phrase in and of itself. Given this project’s explicit initial leaning towards individual trajectories of what Hector Carrillo (2017) terms “sexual migration” (for earlier theorizations of the concept see Cantú, 2009 [1999]; Carrillo, 2004; Parker, 1997), and Richard Mole (2021) summarizes under the rubric of “queer migration”, the most instinctual move in front of these iterations would likely be to read the discursive realm of betterness (of Europeanness, of freedom, etc.) which they invoke, as one relating, first and foremost, to the spheres of gender and sexuality – or, alternatively, to the continuum gender/sexuality – with the trope of ‘the good life’ thus coming to equate a life of enhanced gender/sexual freedoms, which migration is expected to render more easily attainable. Even if aspirations to freer gendered and/or sexual possibilities do undeniably figure as prominent referents in my interlocutors’ invocations of their search for ‘the good life’ in migration – on top of also constituting the moral-discursive grounds on which their right to reside in Italy often has to legally pivot (see Prearo, 2020) –, here I nevertheless want to reorient my argument in a slightly less straightforward direction. Without dismissing the role played in my interlocutors’ trajectories of mobility by what could be grouped under the useful, if imperfect, discursive rubric of ‘queerness’, I suggest that privileging a heuristic of ‘sexual freedom’ when making sense of such routes of movement and aspiration (see Carling and Collins, 2020; Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023) constitutes a limiting, rather than an enabling, analytical move: one which obscures more than it may hope to illuminate (Carrillo, 2017).

The rationale propelling this reorientation is two-fold. First of all, in pointing to the limits of a ‘sexual freedom’ heuristic, I am explicitly drawing upon a rich corpus of theoretical and socio-anthropological literature that, starting from the late 1990s, has been striving to develop an understanding of so-called queer migrations that exceeds mere identity-based approaches to gender/sexuality, and rather attends to the workings of gender/sexuality and/in migration as mutually constitutive axes of power (see e.g., Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2017; Decena, 2011; Luibhéid, 2004; 2005; Luibhéid and Cantú, 2005; Luibhéid and Chavez, 2020; Manalansan, 2003; 2006). As Richard Mole (2021, p. 3) reminds us, ‘queer migration’ is in itself a contested category, and general consensus among scholars on what counts as such and what doesn’t is still lacking to this day. To some, ‘queer migration’ quite simplistically stands to identify any project of mobility enacted by ‘queer’ (as in: sexually and/or gender non-normative) people. According to others, this justification alone is insufficient, and a migratory trajectory can only be identified as ‘queer’ “when the needs or desires of non-heterosexual identities, practices and performances are implicated in the process of displacement, influencing the

decision to leave a certain place or choose a particular destination” (Gorman-Murray, 2009 p. 443; see Mole, 2021, pp. 3-4). Mole (2021, p. 3) refuses, however, both of these theoretical positionings, and rather argues “that queer migration should be understood as a more dynamic, two-way process, whereby the experience of migration can also influence sexuality – the way it is understood, performed and experienced – even if the stated motivation is not sexuality-related”. This more comprehensive look at trajectories of queer mobility is one building, in turn, on the abovementioned developments that started to traverse the field of migration studies from the late 1990s onwards, and that eventually conglomerated under the banner of what is known today as queer and trans migration studies (QTMS) (Chávez and Luibhéid, 2020). In approaching my interlocutors’ journeys of mobility from the South Asian region to Italy, it is to this more critical and comprehensive understanding of sexual/queer migration that I have been tending: one that strives to embrace and make sense of the thick, two-way entanglements between sexuality and mobility, as they unfold throughout both structural and subjective components of transnational movement (see also Carling and Collins, 2020; Casa-Cortes et al., 2015; Mezzadra 2001; 2004). The first half of this section (4.2.1.) will thus be devoted to a brief historical-theoretical overview of the field of queer and trans migration studies, and more specifically to those developments within it that have allowed to identify and chart out the limits of simplistic associations between sexual migration and sexual freedom, moving out and coming out, queer migration and queer liberation (see e.g., Carrillo, 2017; Fortier, 2002; Murray, 2016).

Having established the status of both sexuality and migration, as well as of the relationship tying the two of them together as dense, co-constituting assemblages of power, I will then move on to build a further facet of my argument. Albeit by partially departing from the lens previously analyzed and developed, I will suggest that the specific context across which this research unfolds – i.e., contemporary migratory movements of sexually/gender defiant people from the South Asian region to Italy – is one that requires the analysis to further develop in a direction that, at least to an extent, veers away from a strictly sexual/queer migration lens. More specifically, I will suggest that not only is ‘sexual freedom’ an opaque discursive trope that hides more than it shows when it comes to trajectories of transnational mobility (Carrillo, 2017); but also, that a sexual/queer migration analytic in and of itself, as well as the realms of sexuality and queerness tout court, can prove to be just as opaque. By relying on what akshay khanna (2016) thematizes as an ‘everything but’ heuristic of sexuality, as well as on Lauren Berlant’s (2011) famous theorization of cruel optimism and on the analysis of indirection developed in relation to it (pp. 25-28), I will further argue that it is necessary to look not so much, or at least not only, *at* sexuality and queerness, but to rather look *through* and *inside* them, at the granularity of their texture, and, in a way inevitably, also *beyond* and *against* them. As the ensuing discussion will attempt to illuminate, in fact, just as sexuality is always already *everything*

but sexuality (khanna, 2016), so too does sexual migration similarly constitute *everything but* sexual migration.

In light of what discussed in this introduction, then, the following two subsections (i.e., Section 4.2.1. and Section 4.2.2.) of the present chapter will be devoted, respectively, to retrace the main tenets of QTMS, and to introduce these new, additional epistemological lenses of analysis that I have delineated above. The remaining substantial portion of the chapter (i.e., Section 4.3. and Section 4.4.) will be instead occupied by ethnographically-thick engagements with the life- and mobility-stories of two of my primary interlocutors for this research, Shanto and Muneeb: two young ‘queer’ ‘migrants’, for whom complex entanglements of cruel optimism, queer migration, and *everything but* queer migration appear to lie at the very heart of their im/mobility aspirations and projects from South Asia – from Bangladesh and Pakistan, respectively – to Italy.

4.2.1. Bringing Sexuality at the Center of Migration Studies: A Brief Historical and Theoretical Overview

Since its inception as a site of academic enquiry, the field of migration studies has been traversed by multiple, at times opposing, theoretical strands, each one of them providing its own explanatory logic to make sense of disparate migratory trajectories across the world (de Haas, 2014; O’Reilly, 2022). From earlier, all-encompassing understandings of mobility – among them: neo-classical, historical-structural, and push-pull economic theories –, to more recent and more nuanced approaches – centered, instead, around the notions of migration systems and networks, migratory infrastructures, the temporalities of migration, the interplays between migration and emotions, as well as on a so-called ‘transnational’ turn of the discipline –, different perspectives have yielded equally different analytical insights over time (Carling and Collins, 2020; King, 2013; O’Reilly, 2022). As most scholars by now agree on, contemporary global routes of mobility come together to give shape to a multi-dimensional phenomenon, whose vastity and complexity cannot be apprehended through a single grand model of migration (King, 2013; for a partial revision of this stance, see de Haas, 2014). Amidst the abundance of theories and insights stemming from this broad and diverse field of study, there is, however, a realm of inquiry that had to struggle more and longer than others to see its centrality recognized across the discipline: I am referring to the sphere of sexuality, and to the complex role that it does play in processes of transnational migration (Mai and King, 2009).

Until recently, scholarship on transnational migration pretty much overlooked sexuality as a potentially valuable lens to better account for migratory movements worldwide, mostly privileging economics-driven rationales to make sense of individual and collective paths to transnational mobility (Mai and King, 2009; Mole, 2021). Such a systematic neglect of the realm of the sexual across

scholarship on mobility ended up producing a set of related, although seemingly paradoxical, consequences. First of all, given that the sphere of sexuality was generally not being addressed at all, hidden as it was behind preoccupations with economically-driven and labor-related dimensions of migration (Mai and King, 2009), migrants would often end up being represented and discursively constructed as an inherently a-sexual category of people, as “lone breadwinning (largely male) populations”, alien to desire, love, sex, and other related spheres of human experience (Ahmad, 2009, p. 310). At the same time, the normative status extensively accorded to heterosexuality would also ensure that heterosexual identity and practices would not have to be explicitly named to be assumed as present (see Halperin, 1995). They would rather be taken for granted as the default reality – as ‘normality’ in and of itself, in fact –, in addition to being assumed as the preferred reference point for reflections concerning family, labor, and/or gender relations in migration (see Introduction). In other words, heterosexuality’s absence from scholarship and research would translate into a constant and cumbersome presence, with the aforementioned concept of migrants’ a-sexuality/sexlessness paradoxically ending up being conflated with this tacit and always-already-there heterosexual dominion. This whole process, in turn, would inevitably result in the assumption that all migrants could only be straight, and in the consequent erasure of the possibility for lgbt+, queer, and gender- and/or sexually-defiant people on the move to even exist, excluded as they were from the horizon of possibilities that migration scholarship was busy contemplating.

It is thus not a coincidence if the first preoccupations with the realm of the sexual in migration studies began to emerge from an explicitly lgbt-marked standpoint, interested in challenging such widespread heteronormative assumptions about migration phenomena and the individuals partaking in them. The initial aim was, in fact, to start recognizing the existence of all those sexually and/or gender defiant people on the move, who, up until that point, had been ignored, if not actively erased, by the field of migration studies as a whole. This shift began to take place in the late 1990s, with the greatest deal of attention initially being accorded to intranational rural-to-urban trajectories of gay and lesbian mobility (Giametta, 2022; see e.g., Weston, 1995)²¹⁸. Starting from the early 2000s, a constantly-growing focus on transnational sexual (see Carrillo, 2017) or queer (see Mole, 2021) migrations began to gain momentum, although it tended to remain confined mostly to the U.S. context, both in terms of the academic provenance of the studies produced, and of the sites taken into consideration by such works (Giametta, 2022). As to Europe, academic interest in sexual migrations soon came to stand as a synonym for queer asylum and the forced displacement of lgbt+ people fleeing

²¹⁸ For a critique of the logic lying behind this corpus of research focusing on the migratory path of queer people exclusively as a monodirectional movement from rural to urban areas, see Gorman-Murray, 2007; 2009. The alternative embodied model that he proposes to conceive of queer migration can prove useful to look at transnational mobilities, too.

countries of the so-called ‘Global South’ in search of protection via the acquirement of refugee status (Giametta, 2022) – a trend which Italy-based scholarship, too, reflects (see Introduction).

The already mentioned stark and long-standing resistance to the inclusion of the realm of the sexual within ‘classic’ theories of mobility becomes particularly evident when one compares it to the fundamentally different fate of gender, sexuality’s theoretical non-identical twin. Unlike sexuality, gender began to be recognized as a category of analysis for transnational mobility relatively early and in a rather pervasive manner, to the point that both its legitimacy and indispensability as a critical tool for migration studies soon acquired the status of virtually unquestioned principles (Kosnick, 2011). Contrary to what one might think, however, the spread of an understanding of migrations as intrinsically “gendered phenomena” (p. 122) did not bring along similar levels of critical attention to the related sphere of sexuality, let alone of queerness. If anything, it often ended up consolidating the already widespread heteronormativity that most theorizations of transnational migration used to be built on at the time. As noted by queer migration scholar and anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan IV (2006), for long, even the most refined gender-conscious reflections on transnational mobilities tended to rest upon strongly heteronormative and naturalizing assumptions about family, reproduction, parenthood, labor, and care-work, consequently ending up reinforcing a reading of migratory phenomena as undeniably gendered, indeed, but at the same time also as unavoidably heterosexual and heteronormative²¹⁹. Among those assumptions, heterosexual partnership and biological parenthood provided the omnipresent basis for envisioning migrants’ family relations and social networks, dynamics of marriage and family reunification, as well as labor distribution, both within and outside the migrant household (Kosnick, 2011; Manalansan, 2006). A tangible consequence of such gender-sensible but heteronormativity-ridden readings of transnational movement was the reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles, all throughout academic literature on mobility. This included, among other things, the discursive reproduction of women on the move as ‘natural’ nurturers and as always already implicated in an economy of heterosexual marriage or partnership, which migration could only uphold rather than, possibly, disrupt (Manalansan IV, 2006); but also, the construction of migrant men as a-sexual, lone accumulators of capital, who would only move for the purpose of bettering their and their families’ economic conditions (Ahmad, 2009; see also Carling and Collins, 2020).

This scenario can be partly attributed to the fact that, for quite some time, migration studies could not – or did not want to – keep up with what was concomitantly happening within both feminist and

²¹⁹ Manalansan (2003; 2006) formulates the argument specifically when discussing Filipina labor migration: a field whose gender-related dynamics have been richly and productively explored in literature, but always against an implicitly heteronormative backdrop. His arguments can, however, be easily extended to other migration contexts as well, without them losing any heuristic value.

queer theory, with respect to gender and sexuality (see Luibhéid, 2004). Starting from the early 1990s, a sway of radically new understandings of gender, sexuality, the body, and identity as a whole, all deeply rooted in a Foucauldian and poststructuralist ethos (see, among others, Butler, 1988; 1993a; 1999; De Lauretis, 1991; Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993), revolutionized from the inside the whole apparatus of U.S.-based critical theory, leading shortly after to the establishment of queer theory as a recognized field of academic enquiry (see Halperin, 2003), as well as to the popularization of the term ‘queer’ itself, less as an identity marker than as an epistemological tool to dis-mantle the primacy of both normativity and identity in the first place (see Warner, 1993). Building on and expanding Michel Foucault’s (1976) arguments, this new current of thought rested on the fundamental assumption that sexuality did not constitute a natural, ontological given, but rather a discursive production and an effect of power – specifically, of power understood as a productive, rather than as an exclusively repressive, agent (Jagose, 1996, p. 80). Teresa De Lauretis’ (1991) pioneering epistemological provocation to couple the derogatory label ‘queer’ with the sanctified, academically-sanctioned realm of ‘theory’; Micheal Warner’s (1993, p. xxvi) theorization of queer’s “aggressive impulse of generalization” and “thorough resistance to regimes of the normal”; and, perhaps most influentially of all, Judith Butler’s (1988; 1993; 1999; see also earlier on in this thesis, Chapter Two, Section 2.1.) radical revision of the functioning of the entire system of gender and sexuality through their theory of gender performativity: these listed above constitute only a few of the numerous critical interventions that contributed to establish queer theory as the privileged academic site for the most radical forms of critique to flourish – critique of the norm, normalization, and normativity (see Luther, 2024); critique of the heterosexual matrix as both the product and reproducer of such normativity in the first place (see Butler, 1999); critique of both ‘nature’ and ‘identity’ as powerfully productive yet coercive fictions, rather than as fixed, immutable realities and descriptors of reality (for a more detailed overview of queer theory and its developments, see e.g., McCan and Monaghan, 2020; Jagose, 1996).

Hence, while exponents of queer theory were busy questioning the very bases of ‘normalcy’, identity, and subjectivity, contemporary scholars of migrations were still heavily relying on a vision of sexuality as a naturally-given, fundamentally private matter, as such not particularly worthy of rigorous critical attention (Luibhéid, 2004). This theoretical asymmetry led to what migration scholar Eithne Luibhéid, in her pivotal 2004 paper eloquently titled “Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship: A Call for Change”, identified as a problematic and pervasive conflation of sexuality with gender. In this regard, she noted (pp. 232-233):

[T]he study of sexuality and immigration remains marginalized, trivialized, depoliticized, or treated with hostility. Part of the problem is that sexuality continues to be viewed by many immigration scholars as “natural” and

“private”. Sexuality scholars, of course, have convincingly established that sexuality is neither an unmediated “natural” drive nor a private matter; on the contrary, the state and powerful social groups intervene into and deploy sexuality in normative ways. [...] But these understandings have yet to work their way into immigration scholarship. In the instances when sexuality is addressed in immigration scholarship, it is generally conflated with gender, which in turn is often conflated with women—a triple erasure meaning that only women have sexuality, sexuality is gender, and gender or sexuality is normatively heterosexual.

Gradually after Luibhéid’s “call for change”, an expanding body of scholarship started being produced under the rubric of ‘Queer and Trans Migration Studies’ (QTMS), today an established field of academic enquiry, predictably destined to further grow in the near future²²⁰. In particular, a number of U.S.-based scholars started to look into the relationship tying together transnational trajectories of migration and so-called ‘queer’ and/or ‘non-normative’ genders and sexualities, in an attempt to recognize and account for the ways in which sexuality itself would both structure, and be structured, in turn, by processes of mobility. In other words, a new generation of queer and trans migration scholars, fluent in the innovative epistemologies of queer theory itself, was beginning to question the processes of heterosexualization of migrant subjectivities ongoing at the time within the study of global migratory phenomena. Significantly enough, in doing so, they did not stop at demanding the inclusion of lgbt+ people within the scope of analysis of migration studies (Cantú, 2009; Manalansan IV, 2006). They rather called for the employment of “the tools of queer studies as a way to complicate and reexamine assumptions and concepts that unwittingly reify normative notions of gender and sexuality” throughout the study of transnational migratory trajectories (Manalansan IV, 2006, p. 226). This included a commitment to a revised understanding of sexuality itself, not so much as a private feature of individual experience, but rather as an axis of power: one that never exists in isolation, but is rather always part of wide networks of globalized relationalities, spanning across the social, cultural, legal, and economic realms (Manalansan IV, 2006). According to Manalansan IV (2006), the application of a queer perspective to the study of migration was aiming to produce several deep-rooted effects: first of all, that of going beyond a purely economic and labor-driven vision of migration (see also Mai and King, 2009), and consequently of foregrounding an understanding of migrant individuals also as (sexually) desiring, “pleasure seeking” (Manalansan IV, 2006, p. 243) subjectivities; secondly, that of shedding light on the complex web of intertwined social and power relations – gender-, sexuality-, class-, and race-based, among others – informing the lived realities of people on the move; finally,

²²⁰ It is beyond the scope and capacity of the present research to retrace the arguments advanced within this body of works in its entirety. Here, I will rather limit the ensuing discussion to an analysis of a few selected works, chosen first and foremost for their impact on the development of the field of QTMS itself, but also for the contribution that they more contingently provide to the present work – from the shaping of its research questions, up to the interpretation of its final findings. For a thorough bibliography of English-language, authored (i.e., not edited) books in QTMS, see Chávez and Luibhéid, 2020, p. 13.

that of providing the necessary tools to resist the appeal of heteronormative, naturalizing, and biology-driven rationales to make sense of paths to transnational mobility, as well as of the bodies of the individuals who traverse them. What was being brought forward at the time was, in other words, a deep change in the epistemological stance adopted by scholars of transnational mobilities – a change which soon became recognized as a movement towards *queering* the study of migrations in and of itself (Carrillo, 2017).

Late scholar of sexuality and migrations Lionel Cantú was among the first ones to explicitly define the main goal of his work as one aiming “*to queer migration studies*, that is, to expose how migration research and literature is framed by heteronormative assumptions that not only deny the existence of nonheterosexual subjects but also cloak the ways in which sexuality itself influences migratory processes” (2009, p. 21, emphasis added). Such a project toward reframing understandings of sexuality in migration, already relevant in and of itself, was moreover composed of another supplementary layer: that of accounting for the ways in which sexuality is, in turn, worked upon and shaped by mobility itself. Cantú formulated the whole project as follows (*ibid.*):

I argue that sexuality, as a dimension of power, shapes and organizes processes of migration and modes of incorporation. In turn, the contextual and structural transitions that mark the migration experience impact the ways in which identities are formed.

The acknowledgement of the existence of a two-way relationality tying together queerness and sexuality more broadly to migration – both of them understood as axes along which relations of power develop and get structured – was soon destined to become one of the most relevant tenets of queer migration scholarship. That is to say, not only that (queer) sexuality can, and often does, play a significant role in directing trajectories of transnational migration; but also that the structural workings of transnational migration themselves – which include, but are not limited to, border control operations, state-sanctioned migration regimes and related policies for migrants’ il/legalization, diasporic familial and social networks, migrant labor regimes, etc. – contribute to inform how sexuality itself is thought of, expressed, named, experienced, and embodied. Cantú (2009) coined the formula “queer political economy of migration” to designate this new theoretical framework that he forged in order to account precisely for such a complex system of sexuality in/and migration. And it is indeed in the pairing of ‘queer’ with ‘political economy’ that lied the core contribution of his work. Building his argument against the backdrop of scholarship on ‘gay’ men’s migrations from Mexico to the U.S., Cantú began his reflections by denouncing a strong tendency in the field to resort to culturalist arguments in order to make sense of migrant queer sexualities – in his specific case, of Mexican ‘MSMs’ (Men having Sex with Men) relocating to the U.S.. As Cantú noted, the initial response of many

proponents of gay and lesbian studies, in front of an often not easily intelligible sexual and gender ‘diversity’ observed among migrants, was to attribute it entirely to a nebulous, static, and rather essentialist notion of culture. As he wrote (p. 20), “scholars writing in gay and lesbian studies [...] often privilege the cultural and local features of identity formation and resistance over the social structural context that informs individual constructions of identity”. The result of this attitude was twofold: on the one hand, it read Mexican’s sexual culture as ‘backward’ and in need to catch up with more ‘modern’ identity- and rights-based approaches to gender and sexuality; and, on the other, it reduced sexuality to culture alone, thus actively obfuscating the structural power relations that, in fact, do constantly shape the materiality of people’s sexual and gendered lives – all the more so when the people in question are migrants and/or racialized subjectivities, who get easily pushed to inhabit furtherly marginalized social locations, as soon as the migration process begins. It was exactly to counter this tendency to uncritically and solely rely on cultural essentialism that Cantú stressed the need to adopt a queer materialist standpoint as a way to look at sexualities, social relations, identities, as well as culture itself, as always already embedded in global and structurally unequal relations of power. Sexuality itself, purposefully used in the singular form, constituted for him such a dimension of power, constantly at play in shaping migratory processes while also being shaped by them in turn. As he wrote (p. 169):

My argument for theoretically integrating sexuality into migration scholarship should not be read as merely including “gays” in our research. My assertion is that sexuality, understood as a dimension of power relations embedded in a political economy, shapes migratory processes.

After Cantú’s premature death, his line of argument was taken up by many other scholars operating within the field of queer migration studies, across and beyond the U.S.. More or less recent reflections on Latino and other racialized sexualities in the U.S., queer asylum, the entanglements of state policy, migration, and sexuality, all carry the mark of Cantú’s refined theoretical and epistemological stance (see e.g., Carrillo, 2017; Giametta, 2017; Lewis and Naples, 2014; Luibhéid and Chavez, 2020; Murray, 2016). The most comprehensive advancement of his model, however, was undertaken by Hector Carrillo (2017), within the context of his long-term anthropological study of what he termed the “sexual migration” of Mexican gay men to the U.S.. According to an earlier definition that he provided of the concept (2004, p. 59):

[sexual migration] refers to international migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from

experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights.

In his later and more comprehensive work *Pathways of Desire* (2017), he expanded this definition prompted by a double-edged purpose: first of all, that of accounting for the multiple internal varieties that inevitably characterize sexual migration – and thus end up distinguishing the experiences of each migrant from those of another – but that nonetheless tend to be overlooked by mobility and migration scholarship; and, secondly, that of better detecting the entanglements between sexuality-related causes of mobility and more ‘classic’ motivations, such as those ascribable to the realms of economics and family relations. Crucially, in this later work, Carrillo (2017) proposed an important advancement to Cantú’s perspective by critically re-evaluating the role played by ‘culture’ itself in shaping trajectories of sexual migration. Even though agreeing with Cantú’s stance against the widespread cultural essentialism characterizing academic understandings of Mexican and other racialized ‘non-normative’ sexualities in the U.S., Carrillo exposed Cantú’s materialist model as unable to properly account for the role that culture does indeed play in shaping the lives and identities of sexually/gender defiant people on the move²²¹. According to his perspective, the necessary step that the discipline of queer migration studies should undertake is that of reconciling a materialist, queer political-economic framework, with more culturally-sensible understandings of enactments and embodiments of gender and sexuality, in, after, and – crucially – also *before* migration. Such an endeavor would ideally result in a newfound scholarly ability to address those gaps that, according to Carrillo, still affect much queer migration scholarship to this day. The most compelling one of them coincides, predictably enough, with “the absence of a balanced framework that can help us link *cultural and structural* explanations for sexual migration—for simultaneously analyzing the roles played by structural and cultural factors at all stages of the migration process” (pp. 27-28, emphasis added). The other gaps include: scholars’ lack of engagement with the entirety of people’s migratory trajectories, including a systematic assessment of their pre-migration lives and experiences, as well as of social, political, cultural, and/or sexuality-related features of migrants’ contexts of departure; the scarce attention devoted to what Carrillo defines as the realm of ‘cultural differences’, not only between departure and destination country, but also among migrants themselves; and, finally, the poor levels of attention devoted to the racially-inflected rationales lying behind the sexual and romantic interactions that migrants entertain in their new destination countries (pp. 26-28). If properly accounted for, together, not only would these questions contribute to deconstruct easy dichotomies between ‘traditional’ and ‘pre-gay’ countries of departure versus ‘queer-friendly’ and ‘progressive’ countries of arrival – indeed,

²²¹ In the specific cases discussed by both Cantú and Carrillo, of gay men from Mexico to the U.S. The argument, however, can be safely applied to other subjects and contexts of transnational migration as well.

already one of Cantú's (2009) main concerns; they would also allow to properly evaluate migrants' own baggage of gender/sexual defiance not necessarily as a backward-facing, downward-pulling burden that they need to get rid of in order to 'become queer' (see Fortier, 2002), but, potentially, also as a precious resource that they can tap into, throughout and after their migratory journey, to give shape to both their own selves and relationalities with others (Carrillo, 2017). To put it in more straightforward terms, what Carrillo most emphatically points out, with his reflections, is the simple, yet crucial fact that not for everybody sexual migration amounts to a linear trajectory from oppression to freedom; from lacking the language and the space for sexual/gender defiance to develop, to becoming fluent in the jargon and styles of queerness; from living in the closet to coming out. In fact, when looked at up-close, via this more composite perspective, many migrants' pre-migration lives prove to be bursting with 'queerness' already in their countries and cities 'of origin', before any migration project has even started to form. Lumping together, under the banner of 'queer/sexual migrants', people with extremely different experiences of gender/sexuality, languages of lgbt-ness, queer sociality and intimacy, sexual freedom and/or visibility, as well as of violence and oppression – experiences which are influenced, in turn, by people's class position, spending power, education levels, proximity to urban centers, familial ties, religious sentiments, ideological positionings, and more – complicates the possibility to properly apprehend the actual texture of their paths to mobility in the first place. Ultimately, as Carrillo (2017) himself highlights, the capacity to spot and acknowledge complexities and diversities in trajectories of South-North sexual migration – in both their preconditions and outcomes – should bring scholars to question, whenever necessary, what is perhaps the most widespread belief about sexual migration in and of itself: that is, the "common assumption that such transnational movement is *logical*—that it makes sense that gay men [*sic*] would want to leave sexually oppressive places in the global South and go to the more sexually enlightened global North" (p. 5, emphasis in the original). As the second section of the present chapter will show, via the perspective offered by a deep ethnographic engagement with the life- and migration-stories of two primary participants in this research, it is only by delving into those interstices in people's migratory arcs that seem to make 'the less sense', that it becomes possible to try and make justice to the individual and/or familial projects, dreams, aspirations, frustrations, and regrets, which (sexual/queer) migration can alternatively and/or coterminously feed and interrupt.

Returning now to the point where this discussion began, it is thus in his broader effort to attentively and nuancedly develop the concept of sexual migration as one that encompasses "the whole arc of the migration experience" (p. 5), that Carrillo (pp. 257-258) cautions against the risk of privileging an analytic of sexual freedom as the preferred tool to assess the rationales motivating people's trajectories of mobility – trajectories which can be, in turn, potentially endlessly varied in their

premises, unfolding, and outcomes. It is, consequently, with an analogous attitude and purpose that I, too, tap into the lens of sexual/queer migration throughout this chapter and thesis as a whole. And yet, as anticipated earlier on in the introductory section, I also believe that, for the specific context of the present research, a theoretical discussion of mobility as migration cannot simply stop here – no matter how valuable these considerations are. Hence, albeit assuming Carrillo’s (2004; 2007; 2017) standpoint as the leading theoretical guide for my own analysis of the sets of journeys from South Asia to Italy that this research revolves around, I nonetheless also want to take another step, both further and sideways from Carrillo and queer and trans migration studies more broadly, and attempt to temporarily suspend/move aside the primacy of the sexuality lens in and of itself. As I will clarify throughout next section, this is a choice that has much to do with the specificity of the South Asian context – and of the related theorizations of the realm of the sexual that from, and for, the South Asian context stem –, but whose epistemological value does not stop at this geographical and cultural specificity alone.

4.2.2. Moving Sexuality Aside: Proposing Alternative Lenses to Look at Sexual Migrations from South Asia to Italy

As anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, the two theoretical tools that I draw on to develop this additional facet of my overarching argument – one that partially sets aside the primacy of a queer/sexuality lens in and of itself – are akshay khanna’s (2016) heuristic of the *everything but* sexuality, and Lauren Berlant’s (2011) famous theorization of “cruel optimism”, and, more specifically, the method of the analysis of indirection that the concept comes with²²².

When it comes to the former, the rationale behind my choice is quite straightforward: whatever emerged and/or got invoked as ‘sexuality’ – or variations of it: queerness itself, but also sexual/gender orientation, identity, defiance, non-normativity – throughout this research, almost invariably encompassed, in contrast, *everything but* sexuality. In other words, it proved to be a function of other dimensions of the social, which exceeded sexuality in and of itself, and which instead spoke of class, nation, race and racialization dynamics, language, religion, migratory status, respectability, and more. As the discussion will clarify, this has much to do with the way ‘queerness’ circulates in South Asia, as with the implications of sexuality itself becoming a tool in the hands of migration management. Briefly entering the specificities of the spatial and epistemological context where khanna’s argument itself was originally formulated will begin clarify what it is meant by this ‘everything but’ stance, as

²²² I am grateful to professor Aditya Bharadwaj for pointing out to me the aptness of the concept of cruel optimism as an analytical lens for my research, and for patiently and enthusiastically talking me through it, even when I would struggle to keep up with his articulate vision and eloquence.

well as what its main implications are for the study of gender/sexual defiant individuals transnationally on the move from South Asia to Italy today.

It is at the very end of their conspicuous book *Sexualness* (2016), that anthropologist and legal scholar akshay khanna formulates their ‘everything but’ hypothesis, by taking a detour away from India – where the rest of their work had been set up until that point – and to the U.K.. In discussing the naming of Brighton’s Kemptown neighborhood as a ‘gay area’, in contrast with their own experience of the space as one rooted, instead, primarily in race, khanna (2016, p. 371) uncovers how such a naming strategy actively obscures the way that “Gay, rather than being a function of sexuality, is instead the function of race, gender, nation, religion and class”:

My argument is that the naming of a thing as sexuality purports to *resolve*, and thus to exhaust the function of the sexual in the given political domain. What arises from this, named in terms of sexuality, then is actually constituted by everything else and is bereft of a political function of the sexual. Through the naming of Kemptown as ‘Gay’, it is as though the political question of (homo)sexuality has been *resolved*. The political place and indeed the geographical fixing of homosexual bodies has been established. This seeming resolution enables the elements of race, gender, class and nation to constitute the Gay body as white (or capable of being part of a particular aesthetic of whiteness), middle class, British (or at the very least, not the [currently Muslim] other), and in the main venues of the ‘scene’, male. It is in this sense that Gay is not simply a co-constitution of various elements including sexuality, but rather *everything but* Sexuality (ibid., emphasis in the original).

Crucially, according to the author, this ‘everything but’ heuristic requires revisiting the paradigm of intersectionality in and of itself: not only its trivialization as an additive analytic of the subject, whereby subject positions are thought to come into being simply from the summation of different and separate axes of sociality (i.e., from race plus class plus gender plus sexuality, etc.); but also the more proper understanding of intersectionality that does recognize the extent to which all of these axes co-constitute each other. In fact, khanna’s argument aims at reaching a slightly dislocated target from the one intersectionality itself manages to hit. What they do claim is that the naming of something *as* that exact something – in this specific case, of sexuality *as* sexuality – automatically “implies enabling the other elements to become the function of, the constituents of that which is being named”, and to consequently make this ‘something’ appear as if it were, once and for all, *resolved* exactly by means of being named as such. Recognizing the existence of these dynamics, however, “implies recognizing that the moment we name something as being ‘sexuality’, it already becomes everything but sexuality” (p. 373). Along these lines, also in the Indian – and, I add, more broadly South Asian – context, sexuality can be argued to be “a *function* of caste, and of class, region, religion, etc” (p. 372, emphasis added). And in fact, speaking of ‘sexuality’ in a South Asian context – rather than, for instance, of a sexualness “that flows through people without constituting them as subjects” (p. 12; see also the cases

of Sam and Atif in Chapter Two) – already marks the discourse as one belonging to a somewhat specific social locale: urban, English-speaking, and on the higher end of the caste and class spectrum. When translating the argument to the specific case of this research, this ‘everything but’ heuristic thus applies to two different, if communicating, spatial-epistemological grounds: to the discursive and embodied baggage of sexual/gender defiance that participants attach and detach themselves to, before, during, and after migration, and which depends to the social locations they used to occupy in Pakistan or Bangladesh; and to the discursive and embodied baggage of Italian/globalized lgbt-ness, as well as the SOGI rationale, that participants are interpellated by, and have to interact with, in migration – not to mention the frequent incursions of one into the other (see e.g., earlier on in this thesis, Chapter Two). While khanna advocates for the radical solution of foregoing sexuality in and of itself as the main locus and lens of investigation (p. 373), I rather take their reflections as the cue to sideline the optics of sexual/queer migration from the primary position one would expect it to have in a project such as this – expressly interested as it is in ‘queer’ mobilities –, to rather investigate the ‘everything but’ nature of my interlocutors’ experiences of migratory movement and non-movement.

With this, I am not implying that a sexual/queer migration perspective is one which overrides intersections – between sexuality, race, class, language, nation, etc. – or the enhanced complexity of their unfolding in migration. If anything, as the previous section has shown (see 4.2.1.), the opposite is true. Rather, with and via khanna (2016), I aim at highlighting the limitations that an exclusively intersection-based approach acquires at several junctures of the present research. It is this idea of sexuality and queerness’ function-ability that interests me the most here, as I find it particularly apt to restore to participants’ life- and migration-stories their very own granular quality – both when taken individually, as well as when looked at in conversation with each other, if not straight-up one against the other. Just as “the naming of a thing as sexuality purports to resolve, and thus to exhaust the function of the sexual in the given political domain” (p. 371), with sexuality proving to be, in truth, *everything but* sexuality; by extension, I argue, also the naming of a thing as ‘sexual/queer migration’ should be understood as resting on a similar operation. In fact, if possible, both South-North migration to Europe, as well as the broader apparatus of European migration management (see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.), make the ‘everything but’ nature of sexuality in migration – and, consequently, of sexual/queer migration, too – all the more evident. The moment sexuality – or more precisely, sexual orientation and gender identity, in the SOGI lexicon – becomes an admissible ground for international protection, *and* (the co-implication of the two propositions is crucial here) asylum becomes, in turn, virtually the only available legal/izable route left for South-North mobility to happen (see Scieurba, 2018; Sorgoni, 2022), sexuality can no longer be treated as a self-contained, transparent category. Rather, it starts operating as an opaque assemblage, through which managerial, restrictive

mobility regimes act. In this sense, what appears as ‘sexuality’, within transnational migration regimes and asylum procedures, is always already ‘everything but’ sexuality: a condensation of racialized, national, and legal logics, that contributes to decide who may move and who must stay, as well as what happens after movement does or does not occur. Asylum constitutes a site where these dynamics manifest with particular intensity. As numerous studies have shown (see, e.g., Akin, 2017; Gartner, 2015; Giametta, 2017; 2020; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Hathaway and Pobjoy, 2012; Koçak, 2020; Lewis and Naples, 2014; Millbank, 2009; Mole, 2021; Spijkerboer, 2013; Tobin, 2012; Wessels, 2011; specifically for the Italian context, see e.g., Danisi, 2021; Danisi et al., 2021; Martorano and Prearo, 2020), SOGI-motivated asylum procedures have to rest on invasive, if not outright violent, assessments of ‘queer’ credibility, whereby asylum claimants must render themselves legible through specific, more or less strictly-codified idioms of lgbt-ness, if they want to secure their right to mobility and protection, as well as to reception and ‘integration’. This is a process that, more than others, exposes sexuality’s complicity in a globalized system of migration management (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.; for a definition of migration management see Collins, 2018), as well as sexuality’s consequent density as a site – one of many, in fact – for politically-motivated border control, rather than its alleged transparency as descriptor of people’s individual and relational life-worlds. All throughout contemporary migration regimes and infrastructures of migration management, sexuality systematically proves to be, in fact, everything else that sexuality is not, and that under the banner of sexuality itself – most often, of SOGI: of sexual orientation and gender identity – seeks resolution and hiding²²³.

Having established this, I now want to move on to the second facet of my argument, by placing akshay khanna’s (2016) *everything but* heuristic in conversation with Lauren Berlant’s (2011) famous concept of cruel optimism: a move, this one, that allows me to shift from an epistemological critique of sexuality – and of sexuality and/in migration – to an affective analysis of attachment to sexuality and/in migration itself. If khanna’s (2016) thought exposes how sexuality functions as a proxy for numerous other social forces that sexuality are not, Berlant’s (2011) helps explain *why* people – migrants, of course, but also migration researchers – remain emotionally invested in the promise of sexuality and/in migration as a potentially liberatory project and explanatory rationale, even when these very promises sustain constraint, depletion, and suffering, instead. In this sense, then, cruel

²²³ I am aware that such a statement might be mis/read as a problematic, if not as an outright dangerous critique to an apparatus, that of the asylum machine, which is no doubt essential within the contemporary global theatre, as a way to ensure the protection to all those individuals who face threats on a daily basis, including for their sexual/gender defiance. However, I conceive of this reflection mostly as an invitation to complicate the ‘value’ and meanings of SOGI asylum and sexual migration, as well as of migration management and migration categories more broadly. As Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis (2018, p. 59) remind us, that of migration categories “is not merely an issue of semantics. Categories have consequences. They entitle some to protection, rights and resources whilst simultaneously disempowering others”. See also further on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

optimism becomes a tool to grasp how attachments to sexual mobility, freedom, and ‘the good life’ persist, despite and through the structures that erode them.

Cruel optimism can be succinctly but effectively introduced as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant, 2011, p. 24): as the endurance in ‘bad’ desires which hinder, rather than promote, the well-being of the desirer, but whose loss would be, for the desirer herself, paradoxically worse than the damage inflicted upon her by the act of desiring such a problematic object in the first place. While briefly considering the hypothesis that all optimistic attachment might be considered inherently cruel, Berlant eventually ponders how “some scenes of optimism are clearly crueler than others” (p. 24). This cruelty lies exactly in the fact that what Berlant defines as the “vitalizing potency” (ibid.) of the desired object – i.e., what prompts and fuels optimistic attachment to the object to begin with –, rather than promoting the well-being and prosperity of the desirer, is ultimately what contributes to the depletion of that same flourishing, the coveting of which, initially fueled the desirer’s attachment in and of itself. In other words, the ‘thing’ that is longed for and ought to impart energy and vitality is, somewhat paradoxically, the same ‘thing’ that comes to consume and erode these expected benefits. They write (pp. 24-25):

[W]here cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. [...] One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one’s attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition.

Similar relations of cruel optimism, I argue, lie at the very core of participants’ motions of attachment to their migratory trajectories ‘West’: to the already mentioned notions of the good life that fuel them, as well as to conceptions of, and aspirations to, mobility – more often than not, im/mobility – more broadly. This is, quite straightforwardly, the primary and most immediate reason why I summon this concept here, as a productive lens to take an up-close look at the contexts of this research, and the people who traverse them (see the further on in the chapter, Section 4.3.; Section 4.4.).

As anticipated above, however, this same aptness of cruel optimism in pinning down my interlocutors’ ambivalent relationalities to their enacted, and/or coveted, im/mobilities also plays an additional role in my own epistemological and methodological detour away from a predominantly sexual/queer migration lens. If khanna’s (2016) heuristic reveals the need to dislodge sexuality from itself via other social functions (e.g., caste, class, and race), Berlant’s (2011) cruel optimism helps illuminate how an investment in the obfuscated version of sexuality, instead, is affectively sustained, by migrants and researchers alike: that is, why both migrants and scholars continue to invest in sexuality and/in migration as sites of hope – of optimism, indeed – despite the often-unresolvable

contradictions, frustrations, and pains that they/it produce/s. In order to understand how this happens, it is necessary to go back to Berlant's arguments. According to the scholar, the very workings of cruelly optimistic attachments imply that people, in order to tolerate the contradictions inherent to those same attachments – and thus endure practicing them – must narratively construct their desires *through a split*: that is, as though their desires were intrinsically beneficial. In this way, a detachment happens, between the narrativization of desire, and the fact itself that the desired object/scene, despite initially *enabling* the desirer, turns out to be what eventually *disables* her. Berlant's words express this idea much more beautifully and convincingly than I ever could (p. 25):

[A] poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near *x* (as though *x* has autonomous qualities) from the activity of the emotional habitus I have constructed, as a function of having *x* in my life, in order to be able to project out my endurance in proximity to the complex of what *x* seems to offer and proffer. To understand cruel optimism, therefore, one must embark on an analysis of indirection, which provides a way to think about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling.

In the context of this work, I want to argue, practicing an analysis of indirection as the one invoked above – and thus recognizing the narrative split of sexuality and/in migration: that is, of *everything but* sexuality and/in migration – implies engaging in a temporary suspension of a predominantly sexual/queer migration optics, notwithstanding, or exactly by virtue of, sexuality's primacy in a vast array of research locations. Locations which range, in turn, from participants' personal narratives, to institutional discourses of SOGI migration management, up until my own ethnographic investment in sexuality as the anticipated privileged lens of analysis. To retrace Berlant's thought-process (ibid.), this means, first of all, recognizing sexuality as the *enabler* object for migration to happen; secondly, coming to terms with the fact that migration eventually disables the subject, rather than making her prosper; and, ultimately, recognizing that the enabling move could happen in the first place only because sexuality already was *everything but* sexuality: it was, more than anything else, a tool in the hands of migration management. It is necessary, in other words, to split off the *story* of sexuality's role in participants' aspirations to the 'good life', from the actual 'bad life' that sexual migration almost invariably ends up consigning them to. But also, to split off the *story* of sexuality as sexuality, from the actual assemblage of everything else that merges into it, but that sexuality is not (e.g., migration management and border control). This suspension is what proves necessary, in turn, to begin uncovering what other relations of cruel optimism actually conglomerate underneath and through sexuality and/in migration themselves²²⁴.

²²⁴ Indeed, optimistic attachments to migration, to a great extent, become cruel exactly because of the workings of migratory regimes that render sexuality a clog in the migration management machinery itself – that make it, in other words, everything but sexuality (see, for instance, the asylum regime, the systemic injustice that determines access to mobility

Summing up, Berlant's analysis of indirection, especially when paired with khanna's *everything but* heuristic, is what motivates my distancing from a primarily gender/sexuality-infused reading of participants' narratives of im/mobility, not only on a thematical, but also on a methodological level. While khanna (2016) reveals that sexuality always stands in for, and hides, other additional social dynamics, Berlant shows how subjects – including participants and, crucially, myself as the researcher in this im/mobility project – tend to sustain attachments to sexuality and/in migration, despite the strident contradictions that come with this operation. Reading these two concepts together invites practicing, instead, the *indirection* that Berlant evokes: an analytic pause that suspends sexuality's explanatory primacy, to uncover everything else that sexuality is not, and that flows into the complex assemblages of desire, aspiration, and constraint, which shape sexual/gender defiant people's lives, in and around transnational migration.

And indeed, in the case of this research, participants' iterations of the good (sexual/gendered) life never emerge in isolation, and never exhaust the full range of meanings contained within their migratory projects. Rather, they thrive in, and exist in function of, much more complex discursive and affective universes, whereby motions of sexual, romantic, social, economic, legal, familial, even aesthetic, attachment to, and/or refusal of, both Italy and 'home' paradoxically and incoherently coexist and feed off each other, in ways that a sexual/queer migration lens alone would struggle to make sense of²²⁵. Thus, aspirations to a better, European life end up co-existing, for instance, with negative feelings of hatred and regret geared towards Italy and the choice to migrate in the first place (see Shanto: Chapter Four, Section 4.3.). Again, the coveting of documents, international protection, or State-sanctioned assistance does not exclude the existence of feelings of hatred and contempt towards being legally and socially recognized and treated as a 'gay refugee' (see Shanto; Sam: Chapter Two, Section, 2.2.; but also Atif: Chapter Two, Section 2.3.). Or again, persistent complaints about having ended up in Italian cities which feel like nothing less than worse versions of 'home' co-exist with just-as-enduring attempts at recreating several scenes of 'home' in those exact same Italian cities, through ambivalent iterations of what Avtar Brah has famously termed "homing desires" (1996, p. 180; for a further elaboration of the concept, see Fortier, 2003) (see again Shanto, but, in a way, also Muneeb: Chapter Four, Section 4.4.). These are only some of the sets of ambivalences and incoherencies that, I believe, a sexual/queer migration optics alone would fail to account for, but that instead constitute the pulsating heart of participants' everyday lives and struggles in migration.

In order to explore these and other ambivalences, as well as to restore some much-needed concreteness to this set of otherwise rather abstract arguments, it is now imperative to turn to a hands-on

or lack thereof, the unbalanced politics of visas and passports' strengths, the weight played by class and racialization dynamics throughout this whole system of migration management, but also beyond it).

²²⁵ And, I would go as far as to suggest, no matter the level of intersectional sensibility that it might aspire to reach.

engagement with participants' life stories, as I got to apprehend them throughout research conduction. More specifically, I will devote the remaining sections of the present chapter (Section 4.3 and Section 4.4.) to an up-close, in-depth analysis of two primary participants' life- and migration-stories – respectively Shanto and Muneeb's –, which I hope will contribute to further clarify some of the complex interplays that can emerge, when coupling an *everything but* approach (khanna, 2016) to sexual migration

with the lens of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011).

4.3. Shanto. Photography without Images Calls for Imagination, Migration without the Good Life Calls for Optimism, or: Six Photos that I Cannot Show You, and Something More

The closest I ever got to grasp the depth of meaning behind Shanto's ambivalent relation to his project of mobility to Italy was when I saw his photos and I heard him talking about them. Perhaps more than all of the moments of dense conversation we periodically shared during the two years that we knew each other – and when I say dense, I mean *dense* – it was six small, square images that ultimately allowed me into the conundrum that Shanto perceived to have gotten himself entangled into, from the moment he started to assume migration as a potential horizon of possibility for the unfolding of his life. I am referring to the conundrum – better yet, the impasse (Berlant, 2011) – that resulted from Shanto's attachment to an ideal of 'a better life' through migration turning into what can be provisionally termed, via Lauren Berlant (2011), a relation of cruel optimism: a 'bad' desire that ended up contributing to Shanto's depletion rather than to his flourishing, but whose interruption would have been, cruelly enough, even more painful for Shanto than the suffering inflicted upon him by going after that desire in the first place. As the following visually-dense, albeit imageless, discussion will attempt to illuminate, thick entanglements of consolidated axes of intersectional analysis – among which, class particularly stands out – with the more analytically unorthodox realms of cinephilia, creativity, and cinematic/photographic visuality constitute what both give shape to, and eventually exceed and contribute to interrupt, at least in part, Shanto's abovementioned iterations of cruelly optimistic attachments to mobility-fueled imaginaries of "a better life", x3 (see Section 4.2.).

An exuberant and creative Bangladeshi young man in his late twenties, at the beginning of 2022, Shanto leaves behind his middle-class life as a university student and worker of the media industry in Dhaka, when a series of sexuality-related incidents force him away from his workplace, and reaches Italy after an unexpectedly perilous journey across Eastern Europe. As it has often been the case throughout this research, Italy is not Shanto's chosen destination²²⁶: he is, in fact, planning to find

²²⁶ Due to its strategic location as an outpost within the Mediterranean basin, Italy often serves as the first entry point into Europe, as well as an inevitable transit-country, for many asylum claimants (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). As such, and

work in the Eastern European country of his first arrival²²⁷ – the one that a broker was supposed to organize Shanto’s documents for – when he realizes that he has been “scammed” and “kidnapped”, instead (fieldnotes, 02/23; 12/23; see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.). He thus decides to attempt to escape, and eventually manages to cross the north-eastern Italian border after a difficult journey, during which he alternates walking and other makeshift means of travelling. The reasons why Shanto’s escape ends in Italy, rather than someplace else in Europe, are varied, and can be traced back to practical considerations (the vicinity of the Italian border), uncontrollable geopolitical scenarios (the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war), but, crucially, also to an already-established, long family history of migration to Italy itself, pioneered in particular by an uncle of his, who lived in the country for thirteen years before eventually relocating to London (see Della Puppa and King, 2018 on the phenomenon of Bangladeshi ‘twice-migrants’ relocating from Italy to the U.K.)²²⁸. Once on Italian soil, Shanto does not have many options left other than applying for asylum on grounds of his sexual orientation. As he purposefully points out to me, and not without boasting about it, he manages to obtain refugee status in the least amount of time possible, after acing his interview with the Territorial Commission on his first try – an endeavor which he describes to me as “the most badass thing” he has ever done in his life (fieldnotes, 06/23). At the same time, however, Shanto repeatedly expresses a profound sense of contempt toward his newfound status as a recognized SOGI refugee in Italy (“gay refugee”, in his words), conceiving of it as a limiting, if not outright coercive, position to occupy: one that unfailingly marks him as different and forces him to lie to people all the time, which he hates to do. In other words, residing in Italy as a refugee – and a SOGI refugee all the more so – constitutes, for Shanto, a condition that he would have gladly avoided, had he had any possibility to do so. One that he would be more than happy to relinquish even now, if given the chance to convert it into some other kind of permit.

The ambivalent complexity of Shanto’s migratory trajectory – which this short introduction can only begin to chart out – is one that the six photos mentioned earlier convey with extreme lucidity, precision, and deliberateness. And yet, notwithstanding the importance of these images for both Shanto’s story and my own understanding of it – as the discussion will try to illuminate, in a way, exactly *because of* such an importance (see Section 4.3.4.) – here, I cannot disclose any further details about how, when, and where I came into contact with these pictures, nor can I share the six photos in

because of Dublin Regulation’s first country-rule, in many cases Italy is not properly ‘chosen’ by migrants – most of whom rather aspire to reach countries in central and northern Europe – but it rather ‘ends up’ becoming their destination for a combined mixture of geographic and legal reasons (see also Ambrosini 2018; Colucci 2018; D’Angelo 2019; Hasselberg 2016; Queirolo Palmas 2020).

²²⁷ Out of respect for Shanto’s will to maintain his anonymity, I am deliberately not specifying the name of the country where his journey temporary stops before he enters Italy, as well as the name of the Italian hometown where he eventually settles down.

²²⁸ See also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.

question. It was Shanto who explicitly denied me permission to do so when asked about it, adducing privacy as the reason behind his choice. Even if he is only an amateur photographer – albeit of the extremely talented kind, as far as my judgement is concerned – he has been publishing his shots online for years now. Given that his friends, family, and more or less anonymous social media followers know the images, but, for the most part, do not know about his sexual orientation, Shanto did not want to risk this thesis becoming the connecting ground between the two, the potential outing apparatus that could undo all the labor of sexual concealment that he had to engage in also – in a way, especially so – throughout migration. Moreover, when thinking through Shanto’s case, acknowledging the power held by images over words is already a move which comes with its own amount of irony attached, and quite simply because Shanto is one of the most exuberantly talkative people I have encountered, throughout my research endeavors for sure, but possibly also across my life as a whole. The pseudonym that he chooses for himself, too, represents a self-aware strategy to mockingly pivot on this feature of his (see Pretorious and Patel, 2025): “Do you know what the name ‘Shanto’ means?” – he asks me, after deliberating that this is how he wants to be addressed in writing – “Silent, which I’m not!” (fieldnotes, 06/24). And indeed, as the ensuing discussion will show, all throughout the time that we knew each other, silent was he not – never.

At this juncture, then, one might understandably wonder what is even the point of so emphatically bringing up Shanto’s photos if they can neither be shared nor made explicitly recognizable through description, all the more so if Shanto himself seems to enjoy other means of expression just as much. Among the purposes of this section there will be exactly to show that, indeed, there are reasons for doing so – at least, for attempting to. These are reasons which are both related to the thick nature of photographic material in and of itself (see e.g., Alloa, 2021; Edwards, 2015; Favero, 2022; Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021; Poole, 2005), as well as to the peculiarly visual and cinephile (see Shambu, 2019; 2020) fabric which is tightly sewn into Shanto’s dream “to have a better life” (x3), fueling his more or less serendipitous arrival in Italy. As I will gradually elucidate in writing, the visual ‘voice’ coming out of Shanto’s photography is, in fact, one that somehow manages to partially supersede the sonic voice coming out of Shanto’s mouth, even when the two of them end up confounding one into the other in the messy pastiche of cinematic affects, filmic/filmi aspirations, and frenzied cinephile enthusiasms, which lie deep at the root of Shanto’s iterations of the good life in and of itself.

4.3.1. A Small Experiment: Visual Ethnography Minus the Images

As Sarah Pink (2001) is quick to point out in her *Doing Visual Ethnography*, even if visibility is ever more often becoming the core component of well-thought research designs which programmatically center around visual materials and techniques from the outset, images – be they photos,

drawings, videos, etc. – just as often end up entering the research field serendipitously: as it is frequently the case with all things ethnographic, in an unplanned but no less significant manner. This latter typology of visual serendipity is exactly what fell upon my research field, too – more specifically, upon the micro-field produced by my interactions with Shanto. Before meeting and getting to know Shanto, I had never planned to devote any components of my work to visual analysis and/or visual ethnography. However, the moment he revealed himself to be a passionate photographer, an extremely enthusiast cinephile, as well as an aspiring movie director, things had to change: these elements together – their constant cropping up in Shanto’s threads of self-narrative, as well as their deep entanglement with Shanto’s project of mobility away from Bangladesh – proved, in fact, more than enough to determine a visual turn in my participant-centered, ever-adapting research methodologies (see Chapter One, Section 1.3.3.). And yet, contrary to what these premises might seem to be suggesting, the major issue at stake here is less the unplanned presence of visuality and images in the ethnographic life-story that I am now setting out to write, as, paradoxically enough, their *absence* from it. Albeit having entered the research field with their insisting, relentless presence, due to the ethical obligation to respect Shanto’s will for his photos not to be shown in my work, images and visuality more broadly will have to remain both absent from the concrete materiality of the present ethnographic text that I am writing, as well as unrecognizable within the flow of words that I will nonetheless use to invoke them. In order to be able to ethically work with and through the six photos in question – because I will, indeed, work with and through them – not only will I refrain from showing these pictures in the pages of this thesis, limiting myself to describing them in strictly linguistic terms; I will also resort to only employ deliberately vague descriptive means, so as to further reduce the photos’ legibility, and fully ensure the respect of what Patricia Prieto-Blanco (2021, pp. 333-339) defines as a research participant’s “right to disappear”. Such a right obviously belongs to Shanto, too, and the conditions necessary for it to be guaranteed reflect my own vision of what qualitative research should, at least ideally, always entail (p. 338):

It [the right to disappear] entails a profound and systematic approach to research ethics, which may be materialized by periods of prolonged observation, building of trust and rapport with participants, constant re-negotiation of the conditions of participation, fostering of reflective and evaluative thinking among participants and researchers working in partnerships, honest acknowledgment of mistakes, and the realisation that faces and other identifiable features, while aesthetically pleasing and alluring, may put participants at unnecessary risk.

According to this view and the literature on visual research methods more broadly (see e.g., Pink, 2001; Mannay, 2016), in a circumstance such as this, the decision to withhold visual materials should not be read as a problematic limitation, but rather as a critical and ethical response to the sensitivities involved in working with ‘vulnerable’ individuals, or more generally with people who, for the most

disparate of reasons, choose not to appear and/or to disappear. Still, this essential act of ethical care is one that brings me – as the contingently visual ethnographer of Shanto’s life and/in migration – to contradict the meaningful argument advanced by what has been identified, alternatively, as social sciences’ iconic, pictorial, or, simply enough, visual turn: the fact that, “[e]ven though images are permanently entangled with language, they ought to be considered independently from it” (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021, p.1; see Mitchell, 2002). In other words, in this context, doing visual ethnography *minus the images* – i.e., engaging with images as sites of ethnographic density, without, however, openly showing them in the thickest of their riches: their visibility itself – constitutes an operation that inevitably shifts the analytical focus from *seeing* to (partially) *reading*; from the image as an object of visual consumption to the image as a layered, albeit strategically opaque, text, surely rich in meaning and affect (Edwards, 2015), but nonetheless destined to remain entirely unseen and unseeable, as well as partially unread and unreadable. However noble, this is, evidently enough, an approach that comes with its own set of limitations. First of all, it risks striking way more confusion than clarity in the reader, purposefully deprived as the image-text has to be of its clarity and legibility, on both a visual and a verbal terrain. Additionally, this operation also inevitably ends up emptying the six photos in question of most of their power, failing as it does to restore the multiple levels of non-verbal depth that visibility allows for (see Mitchell, 2002), on top of also obscuring the six images’ “iconic excess”, which cannot satisfactorily “be translated into other dialectics of sense” (Alloa, 2021, p.3) – exactly the kind of translation that I am compelled to make here, instead.

At the same time, however, arguing for the futility of bringing up photography ‘only’ because the actual images cannot be made present – neither in their properly visual texture, nor in a ‘bastardized’ rendition via detailed descriptive writing – only works as long as one keeps on thinking about photos exclusively as representations, as evidences of things that unproblematically exist ‘out there’ in the world. Instead, scholars all over the field of visual anthropology have long contested photography’s early aspirations at evidentiary authority (Pink, 2001, pp. 50-76), and have instead established that the photographic medium, as well as images and other products of visual cultures more broadly, constitute much more than transparent depictions of an objective, outside reality. There always is, in fact, an excess (Poole, 2005) to photography, an abundance (Edwards, 2015) to it, embodied by a photograph’s tendency to “capture[...] more than just what it was meant to show” (p. 237); one that points to the loaded realm of affect, more than of dry evidence. Elizabeth Edwards (2015, p. 248) thematizes it as follows:

it can be argued that ultimately photographs are evidence of affect, of how people feel, and think and negotiate their worlds, and as such photography and photographs are at the very heart of the anthropological endeavour.

What was simply unproblematised evidence has become affect, and the processes of affect have, in their turn, become an evidential force in anthropology as a humanistic discipline.

Additionally and relatedly, as visual anthropologist Paolo Favero (2022, p. 73) argues, photos cannot be confined to the realm of representation alone also because they “function as emanations of the thing represented. They are living things, presences capable of exercising their agency upon us”²²⁹. If the function, meaning, and overall value of photography exceed (Poole, 2005) and abound (Edwards, 2015) that of objective evidence and unmediated representation; if photos are, in their material stillness, things that nonetheless act upon us and make us act (Favero, 2022); if, ultimately, a photograph can be regarded as both a “pseudo-presence” and a “token of absence”, as famously claimed by Susan Sontag in her classic *On Photography* (2005, p. 12), then, here I take these arguments as the definitive cue to try and get away with working with and through photos, without the referents of their visuality being made either present and visible, or readable and recognizable. From now on, I will thus indulge in a small experiment, taking on the paradoxical form of visual ethnography *minus the images*. Being denied permission by Shanto to share his photos in this text and make them recognizable to a potential external reader, I will nonetheless attempt to evoke whatever in these photos goes beyond discernible representation: the overall message that these photos convey, the affective grounds that they cover, as well as the performative power that they hold – at times, exactly by way of their absence – without giving any of their identificatory details away. I will try to convey, in other words, what both these photos and their absence(s) *do* – what they did, at least, within the narrow but meaningful space of my research relationality with Shanto, as well as within the confines of this same text that I’m writing –, rather than what these photos, more straightforwardly, *are*. In order for this operation to become meaningful, from this moment onwards I thus ask readers to use their imagination and choose these six photos’ contents and referents to be whatever and however they want them to be, starting off from the descriptive means without referents that I will be able to provide, in strategically vague writing, throughout the following section.

²²⁹ I am grateful to my dear friend and colleague Valeria Giampietri for introducing this perspective to me, and suggesting I read this paper.

4.3.1.1. Six Photos that I Cannot Show You

Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible
invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

– Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

As anticipated earlier, here I am phantasmatically evoking six images in particular, which form a small but meaningful portion of the rich repertoire of Shanto's personal photographic archive. These six shots were originally taken as part of two separate series: three of them in Bangladesh, roughly seven years prior the onset of Shanto's migration journey, and the remaining others throughout the last three years of Shanto's 'new' life in Italy, as an asylum claimant first, and as a recognized SOGI refugee soon after. Albeit being taken separately and far away from each other in both time and space, when I did get the chance to see them, the six photos were being understood by their author as belonging to one single series, tied together, as they had become, by a newfound narrative thread, connecting Shanto's past days of depression in Bangladesh to his current time of disillusionment in Italy. When looked at together, the six images in question thus convey a frank, straightforward, and particularly harsh chronicle of Shanto's overall project of mobility, understood in both the strictly geographical and more amply existential sense of the term. As a starting point, it is to a description of these photos that I turn here: a description that will evoke the overall message conveyed by the series – better yet, to borrow again from Sontag's (2005, p. 17) words, the “deduction[s], speculation[s], and fantas[ies]” that the photographic series invites – without making the actual visual contents and referents of the images known or recognizable to the reader. Those invited by the six photos are deductions that result from the combination of different levels of knowledge production: from my own interpretation of the photographic material in question, first of all; from my familiarity, built over time, with Shanto's migration trajectory, and with his own ambivalent attitude towards it; and, finally, directly from Shanto's own interpretative insights about the photos – insights that I could listen to and gather in different occasions, the details of which I will not, however, transparently share here, as part of the broader plan of protective disappearance explained earlier.

The first photos in the series portray three slightly different iterations of one composition, which Shanto chose as the symbolic visual representation for the tangible restrictions that he was facing when still living in Bangladesh, and that eventually fed into his decision to leave the country for Europe. As he would often stress also in conversation, these concrete limitations would coincide, first and foremost, with the realm of the law: particularly, with the infamous Section 377, a colonial relic deployed to criminalize homosexuality, which is still alive and well today in Bangladesh (even though

rarely, if ever enforced; see Hossain 2019a; Siddiqi, 2009)²³⁰, Pakistan (Khan, 2019a), and several other former colonies of the British Empire (Chang, 2019; Shahani, 2019). Other related threats and sanctions imposed on his ‘non-normative’ sexuality by family members and societal actors (teachers, the police, straight scammers playing gay on dating apps to extort money, among others), as well as vague but frequent references to Islam and the presence of Islamic extremists in the country – also in explicit connection to the 2016 murder of two prominent local gay activists in Dhaka (see further on, section 4.3.2.1.) – would additionally figure among the very concrete Bangladesh-based limitations that Shanto would identify as acting against his sexual freedom. Hence, in this first reiterated photographic composition, a *something*²³¹ – a something which is inherently mobile and immediately recognizable as such – gets pitted against explicit figurations of other *somethings* which, instead, directly evoke stillness and stuckness, in a straightforward juxtaposition which effectively highlights the contrast between wanting to move, wanting to be free, even, and the impossibility to do and be so.

The direction of this narrative – of being stuck while ‘at home’, and of consequently having to look for freedom elsewhere – gets however bent and interrupted by the second half of the photographic series. The other three pictures, in fact, serve to capture exactly the unexpected contradiction that migration produces for Shanto: in particular, the pervasive, crushing sense of disillusionment that he soon begins to experience once he settles down in Italy. What Shanto is indeed quick to realize is that his new life in Italy, too, is one pervasively dotted by other sets of restrictions, different from the ones previously experienced in Bangladesh, but by no means less insidious. He describes those to me as “invisible limitations” (fieldnotes, 02/23; 12/23), made more difficult to manage by both their newness and opacity (e.g., the existence, in his Italian small hometown, of a close-knit Bangladeshi diasporic community, whose proximity to Shanto and layered socio-relational dynamics would make him feel even more compelled to hide his sexuality than he would be back in Dhaka). The again thrice-repeated photographic composition that he crafts to evoke this new post-migration condition of his – a situation where his dreams are dead, he says, even though the material limitations that used to keep them in chains are, in all respects, not there anymore – is the following: that same visual symbol of freedom, already employed in the earlier series, this time gets portrayed as fully able to operate in the outside world, as being able to properly fulfill its freedom-carrying functions. That is to say, via an opposite representational strategy to the one employed in the first series of images. This, however, does not at all come to convey an impression of ‘freedom’ to the viewer. In continuity with

²³⁰ Hossain (2019a, p. 121), for instance, observes that provisions such as S54 of the Criminal Procedure Code, rather than S377, are frequently used to harass hijras and men who have sex with men in Bangladesh (see also Siddiqi, 2009), although S54 has received far less attention than S377 in projects and interventions concerning the hijra community.

²³¹ This deliberately vague usage of ‘something’ is the formula that I have chosen to employ in this description in order to keep visually and full readability away from the materiality of the present text, while coterminously still discussing Shanto’s photos.

the similarity-in-opposition motif going on between the two series, here this same *something* does not get pitted against a symbol of stuckness, but rather against another canonic image of freedom and movement (i.e., a photographic metaphor for Shanto's dreams), which is, however, what this time gets reduced to a quality of lifeless stillness. The contrast, in the second half of the photographic series, is no longer one between longed-for freedom and imposed immobility, but rather one between two different iterations of freedom itself: one technically attained, and the other systematically and brutally denied, if not outright killed. Not only this, the first symbol of freedom and movement which appears in both series, in this second visual block becomes what, exactly by way of fully fulfilling its supposedly freedom-carrying role, ends up bringing Shanto in front of the photographic representation of the death of his dreams. In other words, the second half of the series contains a visual rendition of how migration to Italy, while undeniably restoring some sets of concrete freedoms for Shanto, nonetheless does so by actively crushing those same aspirations and dreams that had motivated his migratory movement out of Bangladesh in the first place.

4.3.2. Absences Can Be Presences, too: Photographing a Journey of Sexual Migration from Bangladesh to Italy

As the overview above has attempted to illuminate, the one conveyed by Shanto's six-photo series does not quite resemble the ideal relation to mobility one would expect from a person who has successfully fled a life of hardships in his country of origin, aced his Territorial Commission interview, and got allotted international protection on grounds of his sexual orientation, more rapidly and more successfully than it tends to be the case for many others in Italy (see, e.g., AIDA, 2023; Chattopadhyay and Tyner, 2022; Danisi et al., 2021)²³². If anything, the narrative poignantly evoked, as a whole, by the six photos that you cannot see can be rather interpreted as a textbook instance of what Lauren Berlant (2011) terms "cruel optimism", whereby the object/scene that Shanto optimistically attaches himself to – i.e., the move towards "a better life", which he expects will become available to him if he migrates away from Bangladesh: away from the concrete limitations that, in Bangladesh, are chaining his life – turns out to be the very same thing that deprives Shanto of the 'betterness' he is after. That is to say, of the 'betterness' that had produced the surge of optimism prompting his mobility in the first place, and that turns out to be harmful instead, an actual hindrance to Shanto's thriving. According to the original formulation of cruel optimism itself (Berlant, 2011), the source of this problematic relation cannot be looked for in a miscalculation, delusion, or disfunction, inherent to Shanto's

²³² Shanto did everything that was in his power to speed up the procedure as much as possible. First of all, he applied in the *Questura* of a small, provincial town, after realizing that the waiting times in Italy's biggest cities were going to be much longer. Secondly, he actively sought the support of several LGBT+ associations to better prepare for the audition, and to thus ensure to go through the process as quickly and smoothly as possible.

individuality and personal history alone; rather, it already lies deep in the structure and functioning of contemporary iterations of attachment and desire tout court. As also noted by anthropologist Jamie Coates (2019, p. 474) in his own deployment of Berlant's concept to examine Chinese migration to Tokyo, "[i]n using the term cruel optimism, Berlant does not suggest a state of suffering so much as the paradoxical nature of contemporary attachments and desires" in their entirety. A paradoxical nature that, in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant understands as fostered by, and further fostering, in turn, something as broad as life under neoliberal capitalism in its entirety (see also Coates, 2019, p. 474). Exactly by virtue of the concept's broad scope of application (see Parla, 2017; 2019), in recent years, the recurrence of relations of cruel – if not actually *crueler* – optimism, specifically in the lives of transnational migrants, has come to the attention of a growing number of academic contributions. According to Harry Pettit and Wiebe Ruijtenberg (2019, p. 730), this happens because contemporary regimes of transnational migration actually "embod[y] the broader contradictions of modern capitalism":

On the one hand, globalization, urbanization, technological advances, and expanding access to education create aspirations for lives previously not envisioned (Appadurai 1996; Weiss 2009), while the entrenchment of meritocratic ideals promote the 'cruel' notion that those aspirations are accessible to all (Berlant 2011). Yet, on the other hand, austerity, neoliberal economics, and political instability make those aspirations harder to achieve (Sassen 2014; Standing 2011). In these circumstances, many people aspire to migrate in order to overcome a sense of being stuck in life. However, as borders intensify and visa regulations become ever stricter, migration is not easily achieved. Moreover, even if achieved, life after migration is still marked by intense experiences of stuckedness as a result of racialised labour and citizenship regimes in destination countries.

From the projects and frustrations of Chinese migrants in Tokyo (Coates, 2019), to the educational aspirations of Dominican youth in New York (Bartlett, Oliveira and Ungemah, 2018), up to refugees' transition from reception camps to the U.S. education system (McWilliams and Bonet, 2016); from the role played by work permits in the Swedish machine of migration management (Hemmaty, 2024), to the affective dimension of visits and transnational relationalities for Italian people relocating to London (Humbracht, Williams and Cohen, 2023), the lens of cruel optimism has lent itself particularly well to describe the most disparate facets and outcomes of processes of transnational migration and diaspora formation in the contemporary global landscape: the desires that prompt and fuel them, and the disappointments that seem to emerge as the inevitable – in a way, as the structural – counterparts to those same exact desires. And yet, as anthropologist Ayşe Parla (2017; 2019) is forthright in pointing out, this adaptability – and, indeed, this indiscriminate application – of cruel optimism to the most disparate ranges of scenarios is also what risks emptying it of both its deepest meaning and political currency. Thanks to the perspective offered, again, by an in-depth ethnographic engagement

with experiences of migration²³³, Parla (2017, p. 7; see also Parla, 2019) criticizes such “expansive, all-inclusive” ambition inherent in Berlant’s original theorization, as one that obscures the simple yet crucial fact that some iterations of optimism are undoubtedly crueler than others, just as some expressions of hope are more precarious than others, and for reasons that are both historical and structural at the same time. As she bluntly puts it, “I want to work against this generalizing move that subsumes the poor and the rich under the same rubric of cruel optimism” (2017, p. 7). It is with an analogous ethos that I, too, want to rely on the concept here. I do so both in an attempt to isolate the peculiar cruelty of migration-related iterations of optimism and hope, from instances of the same stemming, instead, from contexts that migration are not (see Bartlett, Oliveira and Ungemah, 2018; Coates, 2019; Hemmaty, 2024; Humbracht, Williams and Cohen, 2023; McWilliams and Bonet, 2016); but also, as Parla (2017; 2019) herself acutely does, to foreground the differences in gradient and distribution of optimism and hope *within* single contexts of migration in and of itself. The projection of mechanics of desire onto a trajectory of South-North transnational mobility via asylum can definitely work to further enhance the cruelty already inherent in this and similar iterations of optimism (see Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019); but it also necessarily does so through “differential distribution of hope—and not only in terms of “amounts of hope” available to different groups of migrants, but also in terms of “intensities of hope”” (Parla, 2017, p. 1), within the category of the ‘migrant’ in and of itself.

Against this composite background, then, the ‘paradoxical’ narrative emerging out of Shanto’s photographic depiction of his migration trajectory neither appears as an isolated occurrence in today’s strictly-regulated global theatre of South-North transnational mobility, nor it constitutes a particularly unexpected outcome of Shanto’s own specific path of (sexual/queer) migration from Bangladesh to Italy. It stands, instead, as the result of the peculiar amount and quality of hope and disillusion, that Shanto’s entire arc of migration (see Carrillo, 2017) rests on, and further fosters in turn. As the rest of the discussion will illustrate, the bold – yet here unseeable – visual choices that he makes to photographically represent his migration journey as a profoundly ambivalent and fundamentally anticlimactic one, allow to add a meaningful set of personal, irreducibly singular (Mezzadra, 2001) nuances to what is, indeed, a mostly already-traced global picture: one whereby South-North transnational migration – sexual/queer migration included – proves structurally incapable to fulfill the promises that it gets endowed with at the outset (Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019), or, at least, capable to fulfill some promises more eagerly and more thoroughly than others (see Parla, 2017; 2019).

Always keeping in mind this broader scope for the applicability of Berlant’s concept to the contemporary theatre of global regimes of im/mobility, as well as the useful criticism moved to it (Parla,

²³³ More specifically, throughout her work, Parla engages with the stories and experiences of Bulgarian migrants of Turkish descent relocating and applying for citizenship status in Turkey (Parla, 2017; 2019).

2017; 2019), here it is primarily through the lens of visibility that I want to look at Shanto's cruelly optimistic motions of attachment to, and in, migration. To be more precise, I want to focus on the peculiarly visual texture that iterations of cruel optimism acquire for Shanto, in relation to the promises of 'the good life' presented to him by migration; but also, on the visual negation that Shanto endows his own photography with here, in the pages of a thesis that deals exactly with his path to transnational sexual mobility. When it comes to Shanto, it is in fact visibility the thickest assemblage where cruel optimism conglomerates, but also where it eventually gets interrupted, at least partially and temporarily (see Section 4.3.4.).

As I have already started to note at the beginning of this section, in setting out to explore the peculiarly visual flavor that iterations of cruel optimism in migration acquire for Shanto, I am not oblivious to the limitations inherent in building my argument on the basis of a *de facto* imageless and purposefully vague description of the photographic material in question (see earlier on, Section 4.3.1.). Suffice it to think that, spanning the two photographic series, there are several visual cross-references which materialize, exclusively in visibility, the complex interplays between attachment and aversion, hope and disillusionment, freedom and stuckness, making up, together, the core of Shanto's harmful yet non-renounceable relation *to* mobility, and *through* mobility *to* "a better life" (fieldnotes, 02/23). Ethical concerns and the related imperative to respect Shanto's "right to disappear" (Prieto-Blanco, 2021, pp. 333-339) prevent me from engaging with these visual cross-references any more explicitly than I already have. As a result, they are destined to remain unknown, negligible hints in the grander scheme of things embodied by the present thesis. Yet, what I additionally want to suggest here – crucially, also what allows me to carry on this operation in the first place, what endows this operation with meaning – is the following: this of cruel optimism represents, for Shanto, a chain of relationality which also manifests through a complex balance of visual presences and absences, and, crucially enough, of visual presences-in-absence. Not only can these be safely and productively taken into account in these pages without the photos being made visible, and, consequently, without risking infringing Shanto's will to keep his sexual occlusion towards the outside world intact. At certain specific junctures, they also become the most meaningful exactly by virtue of their absence: that is, because Shanto's six photos are not, and cannot be made, visible within this text. In the introductory section to their *An Anthropology of Absence* (2010, p. 4), Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen thematize this dynamic as the paradox of "the presence of absence", whereby "phenomena may have a powerful presence in people's lives precisely because of their absence". In Shanto's case, this proves to be particularly true for his photography, both when looked at in and of itself, as well as when apprehended in its more contextual relation to the present research and thesis more specifically. Two are, in fact, the main plains of presence/absence which inform, but eventually also exceed, the

relationship of cruel optimism lying at the core of Shanto's mobility project: one that takes place *inside* the photos, and that, as I will now explore, concerns nothing other than (queer) sexuality itself; and another, broader one that concerns the photos' own visual absence/subtraction from the materiality of this exact same text that I am writing. Here, I will start from a consideration of the former, while the latter will be the object of further analysis in the closing section of this portion of the thesis (see section 4.3.4.).

As already clarified earlier, once he reaches Italy, Shanto 'earns' his right to reside in the country by getting refugee status on the ground of his sexual orientation. Although later alternatively identifying as a bisexual man, while also rather scornfully distancing himself from the logic of identity and labels underlying both lgbt+ discourses tout court, and the SOGI asylum apparatus more specifically (see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.), in the story of his life that he reconstructs for the Territorial Commission Shanto decides to stick to a more palatable and intelligible narrative of gayness. As he later on proudly brags about to me, during his *audizione* he speaks non-stop for four hours, starting from a series of childhood incidents that first led his family to suspect of his non-normative sexual inclinations, to then finish off with a retelling of the most recent events that forced him away from his workplace and eventually pushed him to leave the country²³⁴. Predictably enough, however, none of the *somethings* that populate the six images under analysis here are traceable back to, nor reference, sexuality and/or queerness explicitly – neither in the more complex nuances of bisexuality-cum-disidentification from lgbt-ness which more accurately describe Shanto's strategies of sexual meaning-making, nor in the simplified, 'watered down' version of gayness that Shanto feeds the Territorial Commission with²³⁵. With Muñoz (1996), it could be argued that, throughout this photographic series, queerness is un/evidenced ephemerally: it is there only covertly – *in absentia*, even – meant as it is "to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility" (p. 6). If I can sense a queer presence in Shanto's photos, it is only because I am already privy to the details of his biographical and migratory trajectories. Whoever is not, instead, would not need to suspect it to be there at all. Sexuality's photographic presence-in-absence thus works first and foremost as a protective measure consciously enacted by Shanto: one which allows him to widely share such intimately-charged pictures, without risking outing himself to the public. And yet, here I want to suggest that this subtraction of queerness from the visuality of the photographic space acts performatively also on another level, which overflows the six framed photos, as well as the framework of photography tout court, and spills into the vastness of the

²³⁴ This is a reconstruction based on what Shanto told me. I did not have the chance to attend the audition, nor to read the written report with the verdict and the transcript of the audition itself.

²³⁵ I describe it as such only because it is imperfect to describe Shanto, and not at all because gayness is 'watered down' or 'simplistic' per se, if compared to other strategies and labels for sexual self-identification.

‘outside’ world at large. In analogous ways to those described, once again, by Lauren Berlant (2011, pp. 25-27) when exposing their reading of Barbara Johnson’s (1986) analysis of indirection, what absence evokes here – alternatively, what here gets evoked *exactly* by way of its absence – is also Shanto’s idealized aspiration to sexual freedom, as well as, crucially enough, the role that this same absence of sexual freedom plays in modeling Shanto’s future project of mobility out of Bangladesh and towards Europe. To put it simply, when and where the first three photos get taken, Shanto’s sexual inclinations and desires cannot find full, unrestrained expression, and are materially under threat. They also constitute, in turn, a threat themselves to the development of Shanto’s dreamlife and to the unfolding of his aspirations (e.g., a career in the cinema industry), as testified by the workplace accidents that Shanto himself posits as the ultimate catalyst for his decision to flee the country²³⁶. The absence of this specific set of freedoms is thus what contributes to nurture Shanto’s attachment to an ideal of a freer (sexual) life as something to be attained through migration. An ideal which, in turn, becomes the element that allows for his future project of mobility to form, exactly by way of its own quality of absent-thus-coveted fantasy. As Berlant writes, “[t]he present moment is made possible by the fantasy of you, laden with the *x* qualities I can project onto you, given your convenient absence”. In other words, it is exactly by virtue of sexual freedom’s not-being-there-ness that it becomes possible for Shanto to project on it – on the idealization of it, at least – the burden of his ‘better life’ scheme, which he will later attempt to actualize through his migration move out of Bangladesh and towards Europe. These reflections apply well beyond the confines of the photographic image-space, but they also get reflected within it, as the visual absence – the ephemerality, if you will – of sexuality/queerness from the six photos paradoxically produces a ‘materialization’, within the photos themselves, of this exact fantasy-like quality that the ideal of a freer sexual life described so far is made of – *has to* be made of, even, for it *to be* in the first place. The confines between life and image, world and representation, blur here, as these reflections apply to both, while also not exhausting all the possibilities contained in either.

Perhaps unsurprisingly at this point of the discussion, when it comes to the second half of the photographic series, there are again no explicit references to Shanto’s sexuality and/or queerness: neither to Shanto’s defiant sexual orientation, nor to the prospected achievement of an allegedly freer sexual life in Italy, through migration. Instead, still acting by way of its visual absence, sexuality looms large in every picture of this second half of the series exactly by way of its not-being-explicitly-there quality, and only as indirectly signaled by the photographic representation of the failure of Shanto’s initial optimistic attachment to mobility itself. That is to say, in other words, through and

²³⁶ Albeit explicitly positing them among the main catalysts for his decision to leave Bangladesh and embark in his migration journey, Shanto always only hints at these incidents in extremely vague terms, without sharing any further details about them those retrace above, in the body of the text.

within the photographic representation of the ‘death’ of Shanto’s dreams. As previously argued, back in Bangladesh, Shanto’s attachment to a fantasy of ‘a better life’ could conveniently (Berlant, 2011) take shape via the absence of sexual freedom. In Italy, this same iteration of absence – more specifically, the sequestering of this absence in a specific geopolitical formation: Bangladesh itself – functions as the apparatus through which Shanto can, and does, indeed, earn his right to stay in the country as a recognized refugee; acquires this right, even, through the very “badass” (fieldnotes, 06/23) move of passing his asylum audition on the very first try. And yet, once the main technicalities of the migration process are over – Shanto has received his documents and, with them, the legal right to reside in Italy as a ‘certified’ member of a sexual minority – the protective surface of his fantasy-like iteration of the good life as a freer sexual life begins to crack, and its actual contents begin to spill out. As he emphatically complains of with me, roughly one year and a half into his stay in Italy: “[M]ost of the people are happy after getting [their] documents, you know? But getting a document is not... The whole thing. It’s not the life... It’s nothing!” (interview, 06/23). Sexual freedom – in all the opaqueness that this formula comes with (see Carrillo, 2017) – is now technically and legally there for Shanto, covertly embodied by Shanto’s refugee status. And yet, it is a presence that does not entail, at the same time, the co-presence of a ‘better life’ for him. One that does not produce, in other words, the materialization of the much-yearned ‘better life’ assemblage from a realm of desired fantasy into one of actualized reality. If anything, by way of its newfound presentness, sexual freedom has to reveal itself for what it had been, perhaps, from the very beginning: the idealization of something that Italy cannot properly give him; something that had never existed; or, possibly even worse, something that Shanto used to have back home, and yet more or less consciously gave up, in the paradoxical attempt to look for it somewhere else. The following words by Shanto mark an important opening into this difficult realization of his (interview, 06/23):

You know, I have a problem in Bangladesh, if I go back there: there is 377. But, somehow, I can manage myself in Bangladesh. I can fit in Bangladesh. Actually, I want to go back to Bangladesh. If you meet so many people... Maybe others... They will talk shit about their country. I have no grudges. [...] My country is good. I... [When] I was there, I had a life. I had a sex life. I had a social life. I had parties. I [have] done more partying in Bangladesh than in Italy. I have done more partying in Bangladesh! Every Thursday we have... We do party every Thursday... So, my life in Bangladesh was pretty good and if I have a chance to lift the asylum, I will lift it. Because I want to be normal.

As Shanto himself admits, migration, rather than proving to be the trajectory that consigns him to a newfound queerer, freer, more liberated version of himself, turns out to be, instead, the one process that strips him of his very own life. Better yet, of his very own livability, understood as encompassing not so much, or not only, a realm of biological aliveness, as, rather, the social, sexual, and affective

nuances that being fully alive is supposed to be comprised of. Hence, where cruelty seems to act the most treacherously of all, here, is in the further paradox that comes to invest nothing other than the realm of sexuality/queerness itself, concomitantly with the completion of Shanto's migration process. Upon coming to Italy, there it comes, in fact, for Shanto, the additional realization that he was somehow better off in Dhaka *also* on the sexual front: i.e., on that same front upon which both his optimistic attachment to mobility, and his attainment of the legal right to reside in Italy, had to pivot.

In the process of coming to terms with this newfound awareness, it is Bangladesh – and its capital city all the more so – that Shanto recrafts as the affective-geographical formation that, more than anything and any-where else, would allow his aliveness to thrive. It is, in fact, in Dhaka, and not in his new Italian hometown, that Shanto “had a life; [...] had a sex life; [...] had a social life; [...] had parties”. It is, consequently, Dhaka the city that he loves, and looks for, and even attempts to recreate in the Italian town that he finds himself living in – a town that, as he never fails to point out whenever and wherever he can, he deeply and utterly *hates* (see earlier on in this thesis, Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1.). This one carried out by Shanto, then, is a discursive operation that proves opposite to the one required by the workings of the SOGI asylum machine in and of itself: a blunt and conscious interruption of the narratives of victimization and homonational barbarization (see Puar, 2007) that asylum claimants have to project onto their own selves and their countries of origin respectively, in order to see their right to international protection recognized – in a way, their right to South-North transnational mobility more broadly, if we are to consider asylum as virtually the only legal/izable route left for migrants to break into fortress Europe (Sorgoni, 2022; see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.). In other words, Shanto is interrupting what David A. B. Murray (2016) identifies as the “‘*queer migration to liberation nation*’ narrative” (Murray, 2016, ‘Introduction’, emphasis in the original), a hegemonic and pervasive discursive apparatus which constructs SOGI asylees’ countries of origin as backward, traditional, inherently anti-gay, even, while simultaneously according to countries of arrival the status of modern, queer-friendly hubs, of actual safe h(e)avens for all queers to express their identities freely and see their rights finally recognized²³⁷. Accordingly, queer migration is expected to materialize as a linear, teleological trajectory of both literal and metaphoric movement from oppression to freedom, from homophobia to queer liberation (Luibhéid, 2005) – an expectation which, predictably enough, rarely matches reality. As Murray (2016) himself shows throughout his ethnographic engagement with the Canadian asylum apparatus, it is in fact a narrative that both reproduces and naturalizes, by removing them from sight, the workings of imperialist, racist, classist, and homonationalist (see Puar, 2007) discourses in relation to sending and receiving countries. It is also an approach that inevitably

²³⁷ Murray (2016) draws this formulation with specific reference to the context of SOGI asylum migration to Canada, but his broader argument can be fruitfully applied to many other routes of South-North queer asylum migration, too.

and dangerously flattens out the complexities and nuances that each and every single path to sexual/queer migration – including, obviously, Shanto’s – distinguishes itself for (Carillo, 2017)²³⁸.

It is precisely in an attempt to salvage and account for such nuances that, in the ensuing section, I want to turn to a brief but necessary assessment of the broader arc of Shanto’s migration trajectory: of the Bangladeshi, mostly Dhaka-based lgbt+/queer movement, of Shanto’s place within it, as well as of Shanto’s affective relationship with the city of Dhaka more broadly; but also, of how these dimensions contribute to shape the outcomes of Shanto’s path to transnational mobility itself. I do so not only because these locations constitute the primary milieus where Shanto’s ‘queerness’ gets to develop, at times by thriving, other times by remaining hidden and/or being suppressed; but also, because it constitutes an essential operation to further clarify the rationale for Shanto’s apparently counterproductive, without a doubt cruelly optimistic and oftentimes disappointing, but ultimately not at all senseless, migration move/s.

4.3.2.1. “Dhaka is the city that made me who I am”: Understanding the Broader Arc of Shanto’s Migration Trajectory

Shanto’s decision to leave Bangladesh, as well as his subsequent visually-conveyed sense of disappointment with the outcome of this same decision and with his new life as a refugee in Italy, have both to be located within the broader materiality of what his pre-migration life in Dhaka used to look like, first, and of what life in Italy actually ends up entailing for him instead, second. In fact, it is not possible to properly understand and assess the entire arc of Shanto’s sexual migration from Bangladesh to Italy without considering the role that the city of Dhaka plays within it – or, it would be perhaps better to say, the *roles*, plural. On the one hand, Dhaka represents a layered affective hub for Shanto, one that he is so fond of that he strives to find it again as soon as he settles down in Italy (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1.); on the other hand, Dhaka’s urban context also provides the background against which Shanto’s queerness gets to develop, in and around specific circles of lgbt+ activism and sociality, which are marked at the same time by visibility and secrecy, privilege and danger, comfort and mistrust. Having moved to Dhaka from a smaller, more peripheral town for his studies²³⁹, Shanto ends up finding in that urban space – in its fancy cafés and parties, and in the people

²³⁸ As I will explore in the subsequent section, it is exactly at this interpretive glance ‘backwards’ (in the purely spatial and directional sense of the term), that an additional axis of analysis enters the picture – *should* enter the picture, at least. As it is virtually inevitable when discussing ‘queerness’ in Bangladesh and South Asia more broadly, I am talking about class: about class, that is to say, as the diriment dimension in determining access, or lack thereof, to vocabularies, practices, locations, and/or identities of and for sexual/gender defiance in the South Asian region (Hossain, 2019a; Pamment, 2010; Siddiqi, 2011), and, consequently, about class as an indispensable lens to also make sense of the outcomes of sexual migration itself, too. It is also at this same juncture, however, that most of the time class risks remaining opaque, if not being outright obliterated, in accounts of gender/sexual defiant lives in migration.

²³⁹ Here, too, I am keeping the coordinates of Shanto’s life before migration as vague as possible, in order to further ensure the protection of his privacy.

who traverse them – a new home, on an affective, sexual, professional, and overall identitarian level. As he emotionally declares one day: “Dhaka is the city that made me who I am” (fieldnotes, 07/24). And yet, he still decides to leave it behind, in an attempt to chase his dream “to have a better life” (fieldnotes, 02/23) somewhere else.

As already anticipated earlier on in the discussion, before the onset of migration, Shanto is busy jostling between the struggles and comforts that his Dhaka-based, middle-class life afford him: those of an ambitious and creative young man, mostly closeted, and forced to negotiate a rather complicated relationship with his father and the heteronormative expectations bestowed upon him by family members and society more broadly. The middle of three siblings all brilliantly projected towards illustrious careers, Shanto, too, is pursuing a prestigious university degree, although without much enthusiasm from his part. What he is way more intent on cultivating is, instead, the one true dream of his, the ultimate development of his cinephile passions and aspirations – this one, already a rather queer orientation in and of itself, diverging as it does from the straight path envisioned for him by his family’s expectations for his professional future (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 551; 2006b)²⁴⁰: namely, his dream of working in the local cinematic industry and hopefully becoming, one day, a famous movie director himself. It is thus with this bigger purpose in mind that, before being forcefully removed from his workplace, Shanto is trying to make a living out of acting in Dhaka by joining small-scale projects, while also carefully curating a network of friends and acquaintances in the media industry with more or less established directors and screenwriters, as well as with other young creatives like him.

Contextually, Shanto also manages to work his way up to Dhaka’s rather exclusive, if not outright elite, circles of LGBT+ sociality, thanks to a relationship of fond friendship that he develops with one of the circles’ most prominent members: an activist and beloved mentor for those strands of the Bangladeshi LGBT+ community that are mostly comprised by English-speaking, affluent, upper-class, Dhaka-based individuals. As it is common among members of the upper- and upper-middle class youth of the country, Shanto’s first approaches to Dhaka’s LGBT+ circles of sociality take place on the internet, through his engagement with *Roopbaan* and Boys of Bangladesh – respectively, Bangladesh’s most prominent gay online magazine and association (see Hossain, 2019b). Cyberspace in Bangladesh has historically functioned as one of the first and most relevant means for members of sexual and gender minorities to be able to identify and locate one another, build shared networks of

²⁴⁰ Here, I am specifically referring to Sara Ahmed’s famous formulation of the concept of ‘orientation’, as developed throughout her project to ‘queer’ phenomenology (2006a; 2006b). She conceptualizes and contextualizes it as follows (2006a, p. 554): “The concept of orientations allows us to expose how life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point.”

intimacy – sexual, romantic, or more broadly communitarian –, and organize their fights for rights, both on a national and a more globalized scale (Ahmed, 2019; Chaney et al., 2020). When, in the late 1990s-early 2000s, the very first stirrings of a ‘gay’²⁴¹ communitarian ethos start to circulate in the country, they do so primarily online, in informal spaces such as blogs, websites, and chat rooms, that only people who can afford access to the internet can navigate (Karim, 2014; see also Azim and Bilkis, 2023). Boys of Bangladesh is one among such online groups. Founded in 2002 with the name of ‘Boys Only Bangladesh’, it gradually and increasingly gains ground, until it eventually becomes the largest gay network in the country (Azim and Bilkis, 2023) – a position that it still holds to this day, as Shanto’s story also testifies to. And yet, as Shanto makes sure to point out to me right from the beginning, the one and only channel that allows him – a middle-class guy with a rather ordinary family background – access to the city’s secretive circles of queer intimacy, sociality, and nightlife is the intimate proximity that he develops with the abovementioned activist friend of his: his “guardian angel”, in Shanto’s own words (fieldnotes, 06/23). Accordingly, Shanto admits to have always maintained a rather marginal role within the broader dynamics of Dhaka-based lgbt+ sociality, and to have kept his distance from the frontlines of local lgbt+ activism, as well as from sexual/gender identity politics tout court. His ideological stances on the topic lean, instead, towards way less politically queer aspirations to normality and equality – rather than to more disruptive claims to antinormativity –, and in favor of a staunch refusal of both the imperatives of coming out and identification via specifically sexual/gender labels, as well as of what Shanto perceives as the increasingly popular tendency to capitalize on queerness itself – this latter one, in fact, a rather radical posture in and of itself. Overall, however, more than queer politics proper, what Shanto looks for, and indeed manages to find, in Dhaka, is a small but trusted circle of friends and lovers: people he can rely on, spend time with, and draw support from, without their relationships necessarily revolving around either activism or sex. Intimacy and a shared sense of companionship in hardship are, instead, the elements that Shanto seeks and cherishes the most about his ‘queer’ circles in the city (fieldnotes, 02/23). So much so that, once his migration journey ‘West’ is completed, it is exactly this personalized, affect-loaded relation to Dhaka and the people who inhabit it to become Shanto’s new/old horizon of reference: the scenario that he leaves behind but hopes to find again, somehow intact, in Italy too – in proper cruel optimism fashion, ultimately failing to do so, also, perhaps, because he had it already but gave it up. The only thing that he does manage to find among his newfound Italian local gay circles is, in contrast, a hyper-fixation with sex, which he is not at all interested in: “And then people here are so horny, which I’m not!” – he complains of, when I try to enquire about his involvement in local lgbt+ circles

²⁴¹ Gay, even before it was lgbt+, as this was the demographic of people it mostly catered to then.

in Italy – “I’m not at all hungry for sex [laughing]! People here are so hungry for sex! Which I am not!” (interview, 06/23).

At the same time, notwithstanding Shanto’s privileged, if always mediated, access to those spaces in Dhaka where queerness does manage to circulate somewhat freely, his experiences as a member of a sexual minority in Bangladesh, as well as his subsequent decision to leave the country, are also indelibly marked by the persistent threat of violence that looms large on sexual/gender defiant bodies in the country. For Shanto, as well as for the many other ‘regulars’ of Dhaka’s lgbt+ milieus, this threat acquires a particularly concrete texture after the 2016 ‘April killings’, when local lgbt+ activist Xulhaz Mannan and his friend Tonoy Majumdar get brutally murdered in broad daylight in Mannan’s Dhaka residence, by assailants posing as postal workers but later identified as members of an Islamist extremist group with links to al-Qaeda (Hossain, 2019a; Hossain and Rahman, 2025; Siddiqi, 2019)²⁴². One of the few openly gay activists in the country, Xulhaz was the leading figure in the Bangladeshi movement for lgbt+ rights: a reference point for a significant portion of Dhaka’s queer population, as well as the chief editor of the already mentioned *Roopban*: the first Bangla-language online publication centered on queer lives, which, unlike more widespread NGO-led sexual health-focused initiatives, presented itself mainly as a lifestyle magazine, but which quickly became a broader platform for activism, too (Hossain, 2019a: 2019b; Hossain and Rahman, 2025). In fact, *Roopbaan* functioned as “an alternative third space” (Hossain, 2019a, p. 123), attempting to navigate and potentially bridge the divide between Western-style, identity-based gay activism, and the bio-medical ‘MSM’ framework commonly used in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts and extremely widespread in Bangladesh.

Right in the aftermath of the tragedy, many international observers take the killings as the ultimate confirmation of an already-existing image of Bangladesh as a Muslim-majority nation, and, as such, also as a necessarily violently homophobic country (Siddiqi, 2019). Yet, for others, the attack comes as a shock precisely because it had no clear precedent in the Bangladeshi context, as never before had a public assault of this magnitude been directed at queer and/or sexual/gender defiant individuals in the country (Hossain, 2019a). In hindsight, April 2016 is now widely recognized as a watershed moment for the Bangladeshi queer movement (Ahmed, 2019), and understandably so. Even though lgbt+

²⁴² On the occasion of 2014 Bengali New Year festivities, *Roopban* organized for the first time what they defined a ‘Rainbow Rally’, which brought together participants from all fringes of society, including hijras, individuals identifying as gay and lesbian, alongside several NGO representatives. While the organizers did not intend to explicitly promote lgbt+ identities through the rally, an online news outlet framed the event as a gay pride march, and this portrayal sparked a wave of hostile responses and backlash on social media. The rally was held again in 2015, but plans for a 2016 edition were halted when the police denied their permission, citing security concerns linked to credible threats from extremist groups. Despite the official ban, a small group nonetheless attempted to gather on April 14, 2016, but eventually ended up being detained by law enforcement. In an effort to assist the detained rally participants, activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabby Tonoy went to the police station – an act that ultimately placed them in greater danger. As anticipated above, both were tragically murdered at Mannan’s home only ten days later (Hossain, 2019a).

networks of sociality and forms of activism certainly existed before and have persisted since, the murders of the two activists end up reshaping the contours of the movement, perhaps more significantly than any other prior or later events so far. Not only does formal rights work nearly come to a halt in the aftermath of the murders; but also – and relevantly for this research – many among those who have the financial means to do so decide to flee the country and seek asylum abroad, while those forced to stay largely go underground (Hossain, 2019a; 2019b). Shanto, too, begins to formulate his migration plan right after the killings. For the first time in 2016, after news of the murders spreads out, he realizes that “to build [his] own dream” and for “the safety of [his]” (interview, 06/23), he has to leave the country and settle down somewhere else, abroad. Due to his more precarious social positioning – especially if compared to other members of local lgbt+ milieus, who can enjoy particularly high degrees of class-related ease of mobility –, it takes Shanto more than four years to actualize his migration plan. Once he does manage to move, moreover, he gets scammed by a broker and eventually finds himself *forced* to become a refugee in Italy (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021) after reaching the country as an ‘illegal’ migrant, albeit having initially no intention to do so (interview, 04/24; see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.). Hence, by going hand in hand with Shanto’s aspirations to Europeaness and obstinate dream “to have a better life” – as well as, crucially enough, with the restrictions on transnational mobility imposed on his body by the combination of European migration laws, the global game of passport strengths and weaknesses, and his class and race positionalities –, looming threats of homophobic violence, too, play out a crucial role in his life and trajectory of mobility out of Bangladesh. Threats, these latter ones, that contribute to feed his sense of urgency about leaving the country, while also not eliminating his profound yet ambivalent attachment to the city of Dhaka, as the only place where his professional, sexual, and communitarian livability is ultimately deemed possible.

This sense of possibility that Shanto attaches to Dhaka has to be understood, once again, as existing against an extremely fractured landscape of sexual/gender defiance – both in the city in and of itself, and in Bangladesh at large – of which Shanto’s experiences embody but one portion, out of a much wider and more variegated whole. In fact, alongside self-identified gay and bisexual men who, not too dissimilarly from Shanto, orbit around realities like BoB and *Roopban* and more or less confidently adopt the styles and languages of global queerness, many others in the country – mostly non-English speaking individuals from lower-class backgrounds – express and embody their sexual and gender defiance through entirely different channels, not necessarily rooted in ontological, identity-based models of subjectivity: through the ‘local’ epistemologies of hijra-ness and khoti-ness, for

instance, and/or the NGO-ized epidemiological register of the ‘MSM’ (see Hossain, 2018; 2019a)²⁴³. Regardless of a common belonging to a realm of ‘queerness’, these sectors are rarely in active conversation with one another, and they rather tend to develop across rigid, though not unmovable, lines of class, which in turn become lines of identity, language, privilege, visibility, marginality, as well as im/mobility. As Dina Siddiqi (2011, p. 2) points out, it is, in fact, class position that “mediates to a significant degree the reception, appropriation or rejection of transnational categories such as MSM and LGBT” and the related discourses and strategies of dis/identification and in/visibility, that around each category develop. Given that “the global circuits through which the terms MSM and ‘gay’ travel, although overlapping, are distinctly class-specific”, Siddiqi explains (ibid.):

more affluent youth in Bangladesh who have internet access and knowledge of English can connect with peers in the ‘global gay community’ and the LGBT movement; those from poorer backgrounds, the ‘targets’ of public health providers, find themselves incorporated into an ‘NGO-enabled’ koti/hijra/MSM community. Furthermore, ideologically, the two transnational discourses of MSM and gay currently circulating are in tension with each other, if not mutually exclusive.

Notwithstanding his efforts in pointing out the gap in social class separating him from the head activists of Dhaka’s lgbt+ movement, Shanto’s positionality puts him at a much greater proximity to the former category of people, rather than the latter: that of an increasingly cosmopolitan youth, who owns – and, if not, manages to carve out – the economic, linguistic, and social means to access globalized discourses of lgbt+ rights and identity – even if to refute them, like Shanto does; the spaces for organizing and socializing that from such discourses depend; as well as the possibility to leave those same spaces behind, if and when deemed necessary. Indeed, this specific social positioning is also what shapes those aspirations to ‘betterness’ that Shanto himself posits as the basis for the planning

²⁴³ While groups aligned with *Roopbaan* like BoB position themselves as part of a global lgbt+ identity-based movement, this framing does not resonate with local hijra communities, for instance, or with NGO actors mostly focused on MSMs (Men having Sex with Men), whose models of engagement are more localized and primarily centered around health service provision, rather than on identity-based claims. Indeed, the channels of lgbt+ organizing that Shanto more or less confidently finds himself traversing in Dhaka – and that thrive on a globalized language of lgbt+ identity and rights, as well as on modes of sociality that require a certain amount of social and financial capital to be accessed – aren’t the only existing ones in the city, nor in the Bangladeshi context at large. Parallel to the first attempts at identity-based community- and intimacy-building, sprouting among Bangladesh’s affluent, urban, English-speaking strata of society, and then merging into experiences like those of BoB and *Roopban*, from the late 90s onwards so-called ‘male-to-male sexualities’ also start to become the focus of sexual health-based social and development projects, funded by international donors with the aim to tackle and prevent the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country (Hossain, 2019a). Among these circles, labels such as the aforementioned ‘MSM’ – an epidemiological, rather than strictly identitarian category – start circulating in Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia, to identify men, mostly from lower-class backgrounds, whose ‘non-normative’ sexual behaviors do not necessarily imply knowledge of, or adherence to, one or more of the globalized sexual and/or gender identities making up the ever-expanding lgbt+ acronym (Hossain 2019a). Together with the streams of activism targeting the much more culturally legible category of the ‘hijra’, the ones described so far comprise the three main avenues across which the landscape of ‘non-normative’ gender and sexualities unfolds in Bangladesh, and where different gender/sexual minorities get to negotiate their existence in the country, also today.

and actualization of his migration moves (degli Uberti, 2021, p. 538; see also Kleist and Thorsen 2017). To borrow from Arjun Appadurai's (2003) famous formulation, it is what feeds Shanto's "capacity to aspire": the thing that allows Shanto's visions of futurity and capacity to imagine otherwise to exist in the first place, even when and where the direst prospects of violence are threatening his existence – perhaps, exactly in the face of such threats. Hence, while in Bangladesh queer and sexual/gender defiant individuals and groups continue to face threats on multiple fronts – from violent Islamist actors who see them as emblems of Western immorality, but also from a state increasingly inclined to weaponize against them laws such as Section 377 – the fractures internal to the Bangladeshi queer 'movement' very much remain (Hossain and Rahman, 2024). Fractures that mark, among other things, a significant distance between those who can aspire to move, and those who cannot; but also, as Shanto's case perfectly testifies to, between those who can move safely and quickly, and those who have to do so through makeshift channels of 'illegality' (see Creswell, 2010).

Once westward mobility does eventually manage to enter the frame of Shanto's life, the already-ambivalent scenario drawn so far gets further complicated by the negative changes that migration itself almost immediately determines for him, as well as by the virtually inevitable bouts of disappointment that such changes end up producing (see Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019). Way too often, in both popular and academic understandings of transnational South-North mobility, dimensions of violence, oppression, vulnerability, and suffering get naively and conveniently attached to migrants and refugees' home geographies and temporalities alone, sequestered into migrants' lives in their 'countries of origin'. As Shanto's experiences testify to, however, they should rather be coterminously understood as "an enduring condition [...] perpetuated throughout the entire migration trajectory" (Pinelli, 2017, p. 19): that is to say, also, if not especially so, throughout contexts of arrival, which, rather than guaranteeing migrants with protection, end up further eroding their safety via social and institutionalized forms of abuse (Pinelli, 2017; see also Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes, 2004; Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021). It is, in fact, migration itself – the institutional violence inherent in regimes of migration management and in reception systems, and subsequently percolating all through migrants' post-arrival lives – to frequently produce some of the most vicious forms of suffering: ones that, albeit structurally different from those experienced in people's home-countries, prove no less problematic and pervasive (Pinelli, 2017). And thus, the moment Shanto steps foot in Italy, he is almost immediately met with the harsh reality that the betterness he was after will prove much more complicated to reach than what he had originally planned, and that he has to start over, almost from scratch, on each and every side of his life: career-wise, predictably enough, but also sexuality- and community-wise. He thus finds himself working entirely different kinds of jobs from those he was used to in the past – he gets a draining position in a warehouse, first, and a seasonal occupation in a restaurant, later; he

finds himself immersed in a language that he cannot understand and struggles to learn (Italian) and in a community (his small town's Bangladeshi diaspora) whose power and relational dynamics prove much more opaque and harder to navigate for him, than how they used to be back home; he is constantly compelled to interact with an unreasonably complex apparatus of migratory bureaucracy, all the while adjusting to his brand new status as a 'gay refugee' – a status he despises and would rather forego, in favor of an allegedly much more manageable work permit (see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3.). In other words, Shanto's migratory movement entails a significant change for the worse, first and foremost, in his class position, and consequently in his capabilities to draw nearer to his ideal of the good life itself (see Berlant, 2011) – the same which prompted him to migrate out of Bangladesh in the first place. But also, in his capabilities to imagine a different reality from the one he is living in (see Appadurai, 2003; see also next sections, 4.3.3.; 4.3.4.). Shanto's path to mobility thus turns into a movement *from* the relative comforts and pleasures that his middle-class life afforded him back in Dhaka – albeit always tinged by threats of heteronormative sanction and homophobic violence –, *to* the class, racial, labor, linguistic, legal, and sexual precarity that invests his life in Italy, and that almost invariably comes to characterize the initial phases of migrants' lives in Italy. It is a passage, in other words, from the possibility to imagine and cultivate his dream – albeit while juggling more or less insidious, more or less dangerous, sets of concrete limitations –, to the harsh reality that this same dream of his has become ever more distant and harder to grasp. As his photos go as far as to suggest, that this dream has, quite simply, died.

At this point of the discussion, a brief clarification is due: whether Shanto was 'actually' better off in Dhaka or not is neither something for me to possibly establish at this point, nor, I would suggest, the right kind of question to be posited here. What I rather deem more relevant and worthy of attention are the multiple layers making up the discursive operation via which life in Dhaka gets refashioned, by Shanto, as ultimately better than his coveted 'better life' outside Bangladesh: what lies behind it, what makes it possible, and what this operation, in turn, performatively produces, not only on a discursive terrain, but also on a material one. Shanto is now 'legal', both when it comes to his sexuality and his migratory status, and this is a fact beyond dispute. He is, however, also much more than just that: he is a refugee, for the most part forced to hide the grounds upon which refugeeness got accorded to him in the first place (i.e., his homo/bisexuality); a racialized person in a white-majority, historically racist country (see e.g., Curcio, 2024 on Italy's repressed history of colonialism and contemporary systemic upholding of racist structures); a new member of a tight-knit Bangladeshi community in diaspora, who shares familial and friendship ties with several of its members; a bisexual man looking for something more than casual sex, but struggling to find it; a legally recognized 'gay refugee' who, ironically enough, despises sexual identity politics and LGBT+ activism tout court; an exuberant

and extroverted creative, confined to live in an Italian town which he hates, and which he finds dull and boring; a former middle-class university student and aspiring movie director, dreaming to live off his passion for the cinema hall (and everything that happens within it, and behind it, and beyond it), but, for the time being, compelled to work way less shiny jobs, instead. Only by assessing all these additional nuances that Shanto's positionality takes on in migration, while also concomitantly keeping them in active conversation with what his pre-migration life used to look like (see Carrillo, 2017), I argue, it becomes possible to fully apprehend the nature of Shanto's path to sexual migration: the bouts of cruel optimism that fuel it, while also not exhausting all of the possibilities contained within it; the ambivalences that often come to inhabit it; and finally – in a way, perhaps most relevantly of all – the overall *everything but* nature (see khanna, 2016) that characterizes it, without the proper apprehension of which, Shanto's project of mobility would be stripped of most of its meaning, depth, and outright reasonableness. Indeed, if one looks at sexuality and queerness for what they hide behind the appearance of their own resolved quality (see khanna, 2016; see also early on in this chapter, Section 4.2.2.), it only makes sense that Shanto wants to leave Dhaka behind and try his luck abroad: in Dhaka, sexuality and queerness speak, in fact, of class, religion, family, and the nation, more than, or in addition to, sexuality proper. It makes, however, just as much sense that he regrets his migration move, once his journey to Italy is completed: there, too, sexuality proves to be the function of migration management, race, class, language, history, and citizenship status, more than anything else. These seemingly opposite affective realities – Shanto's love for Dhaka *vs.* his need to leave it behind; his aspiration to mobility *vs.* the painful disappointment that migration brings – coexist within Shanto, each of them true at the same time. Hence, the fact that Shanto could “fit in” (interview, 06/23) while in Dhaka, and could consequently carve out a way for himself into the city's somewhat exclusive, underground networks of queer sociality, is the result of the thick entanglements of a certain amount of class privilege, the right kind of intimacy-fueled relationalities and proximities, as well as a small but significant portion of luck – to rely on khanna's (2016) optics, in other words, is the result of *everything but* sexuality itself. Similarly, Shanto's disillusionment and disappointment with his post-migration life in Italy – his outright *hate* for Italy – cannot be isolated from the concrete materiality of life in migration itself, nor can they be understood as detached from Shanto's own attitude – this one, too, heavily influenced by class and class-dependent biases – towards what becoming a ‘migrant’ in Italy entails, especially given that the category of the ‘migrant/immigrant’ (*migrante/immigrato*) is mostly understood as degrading, and associated with specific social markers (e.g., poverty, illiteracy, close-mindedness) that Shanto wants to distance himself from (see King, 2002, p. 89; see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3., and further on in this chapter, Section 4.4.). Once again with khanna (2016), it cannot be understood if not as *everything but* sexual migration.

Against this background, then, Shanto's place in Dhaka's hidden cartographies of queer livability becomes as worthy of attention as Shanto's decision to migrate and leave these spaces behind. When analyzed together with the material conditions of Shanto's post-migration life, it also becomes what allows to make sense of the subsequent feelings of disappointment, nostalgia, and regret that this decision eventually leaves him with. Ultimately, then, Shanto's retrospective refashioning of Dhaka as a locus of queer livability represents the discursive juncture which, more than others, contributes to complicate the sexual rationale lying behind Shanto's migratory project in and of itself. As underlined by Hector Carrillo (2017, p. 5, emphasis added), any analysis of transnational paths to sexual migration, besides taking seriously the sexual rationale in and of itself, should "also scrutinize[...] a common assumption that such transnational movement is *logical*—that it makes sense that gay men would want to leave sexually oppressive places in the global South and go to the more sexually enlightened global North". Cruel optimism becomes one way of accounting for what does not seem to 'make sense' in Shanto's trajectories of movement. However, for the concept to be truly heuristically productive, it also needs to be paired with this more attentive apprehension of Shanto's pre-migration life, advocated for here: with this critical reconsideration of the city of Dhaka – specifically, of certain strains of more or less underground lgbt+ sociality circling through it – as a space where sexual oppressiveness and queer livability can coexist, albeit not without difficulties, at least for some people. It is necessary, in other words, to "attend[...] to the whole arc of the migration experience, thereby seeing how immigrants' pre- migration origins shape later experiences post- migration" (Carrillo, 2017, p. 5), as well as to be willing to recognize both queerness and sexuality more broadly as assemblages of 'things' that queerness and sexuality are not²⁴⁴.

4.3.3. The Visual Fabric of Shanto's 'Better Life': Cinephilia as Futurity

The one outlined so far, all throughout the previous sections, constitutes the thick fabric of Shanto's ruptured dreams – a rupture which, cruelly enough, is deepened, rather than mended, by migration itself. As I abundantly argued already, one of its most uncompromising and accurate representations is the one that Shanto provides through the by-now famous six photos that I cannot show you, but that can nonetheless be evoked in this text, exactly by way of their absence (see Section 4.3.1.1.). Here in this section, however, I want to add a new layer to the current un/visual analysis, and suggest

²⁴⁴ At this point, a clarification is in order here: I can conduct the operation that I am describing and advocating for here only *partially* and *indirectly*, because I have never conducted research in Dhaka, on its lgbt+ movements and spaces for sociality, neither I ever went to Bangladesh in the first place. I have thus attempted to build the analysis only through Shanto's memories and narratives, and via the additional support of secondary literature. Therefore, in this portion of the work, I cannot claim the same level of accuracy and comprehensiveness granted by research conducted directly on the field.

that what a more extensive look at Shanto's life and mobility trajectories allows one to catch is yet another nuance of the previously argued for abundance of photography over representation: of photography's intrinsic affective excess over regimes of evidentiary authority (see Edwards 2015; Poole, 2005; section 4.3.1. of this thesis). Even though I have been characterizing the narrative conveyed by Shanto's photographic series as thoughtfully crafted and deliberate – as illuminating, even, when it comes to grasping Shanto's ambivalent relationality to his own complex project of mobility –, here I want to propose that this is still not the most significant thing about his photos. Had they not been so masterfully crafted, I rather want to suggest, they would have nonetheless mattered *just as much*. And in fact, all across the pages of this thesis, they do manage to matter even if their deliberateness cannot be properly conveyed, stripped as these images have to be of their very own visuality, and masked as they have to get under thick, protective layers of lexical opacity. The reason why this happens has much to do with photography's tight relation with another huge passion of Shanto's, a pillar of Shanto's ideal of the good life in and of itself: cinema, and everything that surrounds it – cinematic visuality, the affective experience of the cinema hall, the world of film, as well as screenwriting.

“I do photography... I'm into photography... Because I always wanted to make films!” (interview, 06/23), Shanto tells me one day, while enthusiastically discussing his photographic passions and habits with me. When properly contextualized within the broader arc of Shanto's life and migration trajectories, it is, I believe, a sentence as simple as this one that can begin to reveal this further subset of photography's abundant, indexical, and performative powers. Shanto's ultimate dream – the one comprising his very own ideal of the dreamlife – is to “do the thing [he used to] do in Bangladesh”: work in the movie industry, make films, eventually become a movie director himself (interview, 06/23). Not an actor, bound, as such, to interpret a role that someone else has developed and will keep on shaping on his behalf; but rather, the one who tells the story, the one who dictates what the terms of the narrative and the modalities of the storytelling will be (interview, 06/23). Significantly enough, he expresses this aspiration also in direct connection with the story of his life, which, one day in the future, he will want to cinematically narrate for a much wider audience to enjoy. While this ambition is, in and of itself, no doubt an arduous one to accomplish, especially in migration – the potential harbinger of even crueler iterations of Shanto's optimism, it could be argued –, it only takes a phone for Shanto's cinematic vision, of both the mundanity of the world that surrounds him and of his own future, to take shape. By way of its material availability as a cheap and accessible means of expression – by way of being the next best thing to directing an actual movie, in a way –, digital photography allows Shanto's horizon of futurity to keep on being cultivated and to remain alive, in migration too. Similarly, it ‘only’ takes Shanto a few euros, an evening off work, and a cinema hall that screens

movies in their original version²⁴⁵, to keep on cultivating, also in Italy, a cinephilia that has been feeding his filmic/filmi aspirations for most of his life. Hence, what I want to suggest here is the following: in the scenario of crippled aspirations that migration produces for Shanto – in the parenthesis of space and time where he has no other option than to (temporarily?) suspend the quest for his future dreamlife, and rather has to settle for a somewhat dull and disappointing everyday as a closeted ‘gay’ refugee in Italy –, phone photography and cinematic spectatorship function for him as proxies for his ambitious project of prospective livability and futurity, in and beyond migration. That is to say, they act as (temporary?) substitutes for his dream of becoming a famous movie director, and of being remembered as one in the future, even after his death (interview, 06/23)²⁴⁶.

A realm where photography and cinema’s proxy-like quality emerges with particular insistence is, paradoxically enough, the vocal narrativization of his life that Shanto performs throughout our research-based interactions. That is to say, in the stories that he profusely narrates about himself and his experiences – past, present, and future – whenever I turn to him as a primary interlocutor for my research. As I already anticipated earlier, before being a talented photographer, a vessel of cinema industry-oriented aspirations, and a nerdy cinephile, Shanto is, first and foremost, a talker²⁴⁷. Even in vocality, however, the fabric of Shanto’s threads of self-narratives proves primarily visual and cinematic in its character. Indeed, when it comes to him, the two realms of expressing himself visually – e.g., via smartphone photography – and of doing it through orality cannot be really understood as distinct and isolated from one another. As I learned the ‘hard’ way throughout research – that is, by repeatedly finding myself entangled into the webs of Shanto’s overflowing vocal enthusiasms –, talking, taking photos, watching movies, talking about taking photos and watching movies, and even aspiring to make movies from scratch, are, for him, all activities that converge, feed off each other, and frequently confound one into the other. First of all, for Shanto, speaking about himself is never an activity happening exclusively through the sonic sphere of orality alone, nor, for that matter, one that stays confined to the individual realm of the self²⁴⁸. Rather, it invariably implies crossing over the multiplicity of selves, situations, feelings, and aesthetics, which, together, comprise the visual- and cinematic-scapes of both his everyday life, and his imagination; of both his past in Bangladesh, and his present in Italy. But, crucially, also of his future, somewhere-perhaps-else. As the passionate

²⁴⁵ Each international movie and tv show distributed in Italy gets dubbed in Italian. Therefore, it is not necessarily common nor easy to find movies in their original version, even in theatres, and especially in a small provincial town like the one where Shanto lives.

²⁴⁶ As I will explore in the concluding section of this paragraph, in a move of partial detachment from Berlant’s (2011) framework itself, I also believe that, by way of this extra-layer of meaning that they get endowed with, photography and cinema allow for an act of self-preservation to be enacted by Shanto; one which seems to me to pertain also to a realm of kindness, rather than exclusively to one of cruelty (see section 4.3.4.).

²⁴⁷ And, incidentally, in active contrast to the pseudonym that he chose for himself in this thesis.

²⁴⁸ At least each time he has done so with me, irrespective of whether I was recording him or not.

cinophile that he is, Shanto speaks of and through cinema in such a way that the act of speaking itself becomes an operation to enlarge the self, but also to find confirmation for it, through the innumerable other selves that populate the movies he watches. In other words, in proper cinephile-fashion (see Shambu, 2019; 2020), for Shanto, talking about himself virtually comes to equal enthusing over the many movies that he has loved, and about those he fantasizes of directing one day; about the scripts that he wrote with his friends back in Dhaka, and about those he can still only visualize in his head. Almost unfailingly, during the most mundane moments of conversation, his words get crowded, filled to the brim, even, with enthusiastic filmic citations, hyper-detailed descriptions of movie scenes, nostalgic memories of songs; but also, with suggestions of what to watch next, harshly critical reviews of the latest big release, complaints about Italy's obsession with dubbing and the consequent lack of access to good movies for him. Some of these narratives-within-the-narrative constitute the verbalizations of projects that Shanto has only imagined, fantasized about realizing, or precariously drafted somewhere as mundane as the note's app of his phone. And indeed, innumerable ideas and visions for film scripts and projects – never twice repeated across our conversations, never twice the same, so dense that it is almost impossible for me to follow their thread in real time, let alone to keep track of them in my fieldnotes afterwards – vitalize his words through their abundant messiness, infusing meaning and hope – optimism, indeed – to his presence in Italy: to his present in Italy as a 'gay refugee' and 'low-skilled' worker, and to his future somewhere – be it in Italy or elsewhere, shall it even matter? – as a big name of the cinema industry; someone people will remember, potentially forever. Some others among these citations pertain, instead, to officially released visual products – mostly movies, short films, or tv shows, both Bangladeshi and international ones. *Made in Heaven* (dir. Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, 2019), *Doob* (dir. Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, 2017), *Raincoat*, *Dosar*, *Memories in March*, (dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2003; 2006; 2010), *Happy Together*, *In the Mood for Love* (dir. Wong Kar-wai, 1997; 2000), *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019), *Joyland* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2022), *Ghetuputra Komola* (dir. Humayun Ahmed, 2012), *Moshari*, *Foreigners Only* (dir. Nuhash Humayun, 2022; 2023), *I'm Not a Robot* (dir. Victoria Warmerdam, 2023), *Call Me by Your Name* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2017): these listed here are only a small portion of the many titles brought up and discussed by Shanto – the few ones, in fact, that I managed to retrieve from my fieldnotes, and, where my diary entries came short, from other traces of our personal exchanges²⁴⁹. And who knows how many I have missed, and how many more I am missing, as the list surely keeps on growing while I write these pages, while time goes by. Certainly, as the examples quickly listed above give a first sense of, each of these citational pieces holds a specific set of

²⁴⁹ These were more or less informal, and were happening both in the more 'confined' dynamic of the ethnographic encounter, as well as in much more mundane and serendipitous locations, such as WhatsApp chats and Instagram DMs.

significance for Shanto, and might thus potentially be employed as a lens to look at his life experiences: at more or less macro- or micro-junctures of his life, both before and after migration – something that Shanto himself does repeatedly when talking to me. The scene from an episode of *Made in Heaven*, where the gay protagonist gets chastised by his parents, for example, or another scene in *Doob*, where an absent father admits his mistakes to his son, would both serve for Shanto to exemplify to me the complex relationship with his own father, and his own sexuality. Many movies are explicitly LGBT-themed, others are not, but nonetheless share other relational ties to Shanto’s affective and material worlds.

Evidently, movies become the preferred lenses to which Shanto turns, in his attempts to make sense of some of the most highly critical junctures of his life. However, they also prove to be the means through which Shanto departs from his past and present life, and dwells into his visions of futurity. In other words, his cinephilia points to a future that, perhaps more than anything else, comes to stand for the content of his thrice-repeated aspirational iteration of “a better life” (fieldnotes, 02/23), which he had initially attached to the act of migration itself. In his meditations on what he terms “new cinephilias”, film critic Girish Shambu (2020, p. 11) theorizes the experience of cinema as being composed of both a ‘there’ and an ‘elsewhere’. While the ‘there’ “consists of actual, real images we encounter” in the act itself of watching, the ‘elsewhere’ comprises, instead, all that exceeds the contingency of the visual act:

But in addition to the ‘there’ of cinema, we also experience an ‘elsewhere’ of cinema. We carry memories of a film’s images and sounds with us into the future, we have reactions and responses to films we watch and, we remember, in incomplete, non-linear fashion, the many films we have seen. All of these form the ‘elsewhere’ of the cinema experience. The ‘elsewhere’ crucially supplements the ‘objective’ encounter with images and sounds that we call the ‘there’. For me, this dichotomy has a useful implication for cinephilia: that a deep engagement with cinema’s richness is something that is developed (‘elsewhere’), not only experienced (‘there’). It takes the imagination and labour of reflection, discussion, criticism and theorisation—all the work done ‘elsewhere’—to create and bring this engagement into being.

In the case of Shanto, the elsewhere of his cinephilia functions as a hint of, and an index to, his coveted futurity: in other words, to Shanto’s vision of what his own ideal futurity would look like – one that has not yet materialized in the present, and may or may not come to life, sometime, somewhere (see also Mains, 2012).

At this juncture, then, I cannot help but trace a parallel between the presence-in-absence of Shanto’s photos from the pages of this thesis – and yet you can imagine them, and that has to suffice – and the presence-in-absence of cinematography from Shanto’s life post-migration – and yet he can assume it as the main object of his optimistic attachment, and that has to suffice as well. Just as the

impossibility to see Shanto's photos in these pages compels the reader to visualize them through, and in, imagination; similarly, I suggest, the impossibility for Shanto to do what he loves in migration – the impossibility for him to live off his passion for cinema and photography, as he was beginning to do back in Dhaka; at times, even the impossibility to do something as simple as going to the cinema, because of newfound language, time, and economic barriers – compels him to do so vicariously, through his own cinephile memory and imagination, and through another form of optimistic attachment to the byproducts of this imagination itself (e.g., his photos and his ideas for future scripts and movies). And all the while he navigates the numerous ups and downs that his new life in Italy as a young, closeted, ambitious Bangladeshi refugee, aspiring to become a director but working in a restaurant instead, has come with. It is thus here, at this juncture, that the visual voice of his photography and the sonic voice of his unstoppable, often chaotic, vocal narratives merge and confound one into the other, leaving the researcher the duty to try and value them both in their singularity, and in their deeply entangled quality, too.

In light of this whole discussion, at this point, it might indeed feel like Shanto's cruelly optimistic attachments to figurations of the good life do not really end, but only get potentially endlessly displaced onto something else: secured to another, ever slightly shifted iteration of 'betterness', just as cruel as the previous one. Stuck in the impasse of having escaped Bangladesh to only find himself in another, possibly worse, version of Bangladesh in Italy²⁵⁰, while also constantly striving to want what he already used to have in Bangladesh itself – in a specific, affectively-coded version of the city of Dhaka, at least –, everything in my reconstruction of Shanto's story seems to be pointing to the emergence of yet another bout of cruel optimism and/or optimistic cruelty, dislocated, this time, in Shanto's cinephilia. In his visual and cinematic passions-obsessions, which find their horizon of reference in his dream to become, one day, a famous director himself. Nothing more than yet another iteration of the fantasy, one might argue, just as, if not more, unattainable – and hence, crueler – than the previous one. And yet, I believe that this lens alone still fails to capture and make sense of the full extent of meanings that are contained within Shanto's visually-dense trajectory of life and/in mobility, and that materialize the most powerfully through an aspect that I have only hinted at throughout the discussion carried on so far. I am referring to Shanto's conscious strategies to make his own story – specifically, *the visual fabric* of his own story – more or less available, graspable, and seeable to others, and not least to me: the aspiring visual ethnographer of his complicated project of sexual mobility. In order to become able to see these extra-layers of meaning – which, I believe, exceed mere cruelty, no matter how optimistic it may get –, it is necessary to go back to the realm of *absences*, and specifically to the deliberate crafting of absences that Shanto operates not only within his photographic projects (see

²⁵⁰ This characterization is one exclusively dependent on Shanto's perspective.

earlier on in this chapter, Section 4.3.2.), but also with respect to the relationality between such projects of his, and my own thesis – more specifically, the permanently fixed materiality of the present written text in and of itself.

4.3.4. Visual Subtraction as a Kinder Iteration of Optimism

When I ask Shanto if I can include in my thesis his by-now-famous-yet-mysterious six photos and he admits that he would prefer if I didn't, mostly out of fear of being recognized and outed through them, I do not rebut: I understand where his worries are coming from, I reassure him, and ultimately it is only up to him to decide. For the time being, that seems to be the end of it. A few weeks later, however, I'm distractedly going through my fieldnotes from those summer-days spent in Shanto's company, when something starts to click within me, and the thoughtful clarity and brilliant deliberateness of the narrative that those six photos, together, convey suddenly hit me in all of their strength, as if I were looking at the images for the first time. All of a sudden, I become restless at the thought of not being able to include the photos in my thesis, within the section that – back then I can only imagine – will be devoted to a discussion of Shanto's story of migration: they reenact Shanto's story of migration better than words ever could, after all, don't they? The considerate half of my researcher-self knows that including them against Shanto's will is out of the question, but the greedy half cannot sit well with the thought of simply letting go of such powerful pictures like this. After engaging in some reading and thinking through this conundrum, I decide to make one last attempt: if the only issue with those six photos is that they are publicly available for everyone to see, and thus people might trace them back to Shanto, I can still ask him to produce anew another photographic narrative of his migration experience in Italy, this time specifically for this research – i.e., specifically for me to include in the pages of this thesis and for the two of us alone to discuss, by more or less strictly attaining to standards of photo-elicitation techniques (see e.g., Fobear, 2016; Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021; Van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart, 2010), and by taking all of the privacy-related precautions needed for Shanto's identity to remain as opaque as he wants. When I propose this plan to Shanto, he accepts rather willingly. I relax: I might have found a way to quench my academic thirst, after all. From that moment onwards, every once in a while, I try and check on the status of the project with him from a distance. Shanto systematically reassures me that he is working at it: it will take him time to do it properly, but once that he is done with it, he will send the pictures directly to me. Time passes, however, and I do not receive anything. In March 2025, Shanto and I finally manage to meet again for the first time after the summer. Deep down, I am really hoping that this will be our chance to finally discuss the research-driven images that – as he had repeatedly reassured me – he had been working on during the previous few months. I am waiting for the right moment to broach the topic,

when, over lunch, it is Shanto himself who brings it up, completely unprompted. He hasn't forgotten about the pictures, he explains, it is just that no matter how hard he tries – *and he has tried*, he stresses – all the photos that he comes up with nonetheless seem to bear the mark of his style. In other words, he is afraid that they, too, will be recognizable, and that people might thus still be able to trace them from my thesis back to him, even if he were to never share these new images online. Upon hearing this statement, I realize once and for all that my ambitions at visual ethnography with Shanto have started and ended at the six photos that I had the privilege to both see and listen to through his words – six photos whose visual contours do not belong to the pages of this thesis, and never will.

When looked at from the angle provided by its rather anticlimactic conclusion, this whole episode might simply be read as an unsuccessful research endeavor – one of many, in fact. Accordingly, this entire thesis section, too, might be easily disregarded as a rather pointless, pushy attempt at making something out of nothing-much. After having written pages over pages about photography-without-images – about photos whose visual content could neither be shown nor made recognizable in text –, am I not about to embark, now, on yet another potentially senseless writing journey, this time pivoting around photos that, perhaps, never came into existence in the first place, or that, if they did, I did not get the chance to see anyway? And yet, in the obstinate, if not outright obsessive, search for meaning that the writing of a PhD thesis inevitably confronts one with, I once again find myself facing the realization that it is in all of these recurring sites of apparent nothingness – of conscious visual negation, in this case – that some of the thickest fringes of meaning can be found to lie.

Before exploring more in depth how this act of negation unfolds across research – what are its meanings, its deeper causes, and its effects – a clarification is due. Here, I do not wish for this interpretive move to pass off as a naïve attempt at romanticizing absence, invisibility, or any other nuances that such a realm of 'nothingness' or 'nothing-much-ness' might take on. All across this section and thesis as a whole, I have indeed been invoking absence/invisibility whenever I deemed it necessary – rather frequently, in fact. But I have always attempted to do so by valuing its contextual, relational, and relative nature, rather than a supposedly intrinsic value of absence itself as sexuality's preferred realm of existence/existence-in-hiding, in the specific context of migration from South Asia to Italy that the present research looks at. In other words, I have made it a point to try and resist interpreting absence as the cue to scavenge, rescue, and restore sexuality and queerness (see Arondekar, 2009; 2023), across a context wherein 'absence' and its potentially numerous declinations might be easily mis/interpreted as structurally more prevailing than presences. From the (alleged) absence and/or invisibility of 'queerness' and 'queer' individuals in migration from South Asia to Italy, to the absence of queerness as an established theme of enquiry across most of the available academic literature on migrations from South Asia to Italy (see Introduction), it would be quite easy to give in to simplistic

generalizations on the need to rescue migrant queerness from the structural neglect it gets consigned to, both materially and discursively, both within academia and beyond it. And yet, in line with the epistemological provocations advanced by Anjali Arondekar (2009; 2023), this constitutes an operation that I am not interested in carrying out here. Albeit not necessarily always visible to the inquisitive eyes of academia, ‘queerness’ neither can be exclusively judged as absent, nor in need of special rescue, across the complex relational entanglements that make up South Asian presence in the Italian territory. In fact, ‘queerness’ can often be a very much visible entity, at least for those who want and/or know how to see it²⁵¹. At the same time, however, neither do I want to surrender here to the surface of the privacy rationale that Shanto so insistently clings to when it comes to his photography, and that photography’s absence from the present text has come to inevitably rest upon. Again, with that, I am not suggesting that Shanto’s concerns over privacy are false, excessive, or a mere excuse – this is not something for me to establish, nor is this what I am interested in finding out here. What I rather want to further probe is what these choices of active visual negation – which Shanto’s privacy rationale contributes to opacify, and which effectively translate into the absence of iconographic visibility from this text – concretely *do*. In other words, what is their performative power within and beyond this research, within and beyond the pages of this thesis.

As I had anticipated earlier on in the discussion, when it comes to Shanto’s case, the interactions of visual presence and absence, and, even more crucially so, of visual presence-in-absence play out on two main different, if related levels: first of all, within the photos in and of themselves, in the form of the ephemerality, allusiveness, and visual non/representation of what the photos portray and do not portray (i.e., sexuality/queerness; see early on in this chapter, Section 4.3.2.)²⁵²; and, secondly and relatedly, against the written, material background of this same text that I am writing. What I mean by this latter point is that Shanto’s subtraction of visibility from the preeminent place that I so much wanted to accord to it in my own writings about him constitutes, in and of itself, a meaningful thing. It constitutes, perhaps, the most meaningful thing of all. Not so incidentally, it is also the one thing that ultimately clarifies why I did choose to un-visually discuss Shanto’s photos here, instead of simply letting go of them once Shanto had made clear that what he wanted for his photography – either already existing, or to be crafted anew – was for it *not* to appear in my thesis. I did so, simply enough, because the material absence of Shanto’s photos from this text proved just as meaningful as the photos in and of themselves: as their visual content, as the narrative they convey, as their overall role in Shanto’s constellations of desires and visions of futurity, in and beyond migration. In order to

²⁵¹ More than anything else, roaming around Rome with Atif gave me a concrete sense of this, as she could spot sexual/gender defiance, and be spotted in turn, just from at a fleeting glance.

²⁵² As well as in what I can and cannot disclose of these same non/representations here (e.g., the visual content of the photos themselves; see previous section).

better clarify what I mean by all that, it is necessary to take a small step back and briefly delve into Shanto's story again.

So far, I have identified the workings of Shanto's trajectory of im/mobility from Bangladesh to Italy as almost perfectly fitting a logic of cruel optimism, both as it gets originally delineated by Lauren Berlant in their 2011 eponymous book – by now a classic of affect studies and cultural studies more broadly –, and as further taken up by a more recent corpus of works specifically focusing on migration (see Bartlett, Oliveira, and Ungemah, 2018; Coates, 2019; Hemmaty, 2024; Humbracht, Williams, Cohen, 2022; McWilliams and Wesley Bonet, 2016; Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019). I have already started to hint at the possibility to partially drift away from the preeminence of this heuristic of cruelty, when discussing Shanto's cinephilia and the peculiarly visual fabric that threads his aspirations "to have a better life" (fieldnotes, 02/23) thanks to transnational mobility. What I want to more directly suggest here is that this final turn that the trajectory of Shanto's creativity takes across the specificities of our (his and mine) research-based relationality – i.e., this reiterated, deliberate act of subtraction of photographic visibility from the material and epistemological space of research itself – is exactly where a marked distancing from Berlant's foregrounding of an analytic of cruelty can, and perhaps should, happen. That of eliminating any possibilities for his photography to visibly appear in this thesis, I want to suggest, constitutes a conscious decision of context-specific subtraction enacted by Shanto: an unstated, yet equally loud, declaration that his photography does not belong here in these pages, but somewhere else – implicitly but crucially, somewhere *better*. Albeit apparently paradoxically, it is exactly in this aspiration to betterness – yet another one, indeed – that I nonetheless spot the most meaningful point of interruption of that rhetoric of cruelty, which otherwise seems to so pervasively shape Shanto's contested journey of transnational queer migration.

As the previous analysis attempted to imagelessly illustrate, the six photos that here I cannot show you constitute the most explicit, concrete, and recognizable materialization of the narrative of cruel optimism that underlies Shanto's trajectory of mobility from Bangladesh to Italy: from the lively, affect-filled, albeit at times also inhospitable and dangerous, life that he used to conduct in Dhaka; to what turns out to be a lonely, often extremely boring, and not necessarily easier existence in an anonymous and provincial town, somewhere in Italy. The photos are, in other words, the visual admission of the fallibility – if not outright failure – of Shanto's attachment *to* mobility, and, *through* mobility, *to* a rather opaque dimension of 'a better life'. They provide a representation of the failure of Shanto's project of migration and of his aspirations; but also, of the failure of Italy itself towards Shanto: of Italy's system of migration management, of its lgbt+ community/ies, and even of one of its Bangladeshi diasporic groups. These are, indeed, all assemblages that have themselves failed Shanto, in one way or another, but whose existence also stands as a reminder of Shanto's failure in recognizing them

as potential sites of disappointment from the very beginning – i.e., at the onset of migration itself –, rather than as sources of potential betterment, and as junctures upon which his mobility project could safely rest. Hence, these multiple levels of failure, which this research thematizes and at times complacently dwells on, become exactly the sites where subtraction has to pivot. In other words, Shanto is practicing an exercise of subtraction from a project about his (‘failed’) migration, *exactly because* it is a project about his (‘failed’) migration. The same (‘failed’) migration that, in turn, ends up subtracting him of pretty much everything that he used to have back in Dhaka: a life, a sexual life, a social life (interview, 06/23).

Crucially, he is operationalizing this subtraction by negating this project access to that one thing which could not be stripped away from him, not even by migration itself – incidentally, the same thing by means of which he gets to express all the frustration and disillusionment that migration has produced for him: photography, which proves meaningful both in and of it itself, as well as when understood in conversation with the broader realms of cinephilia and of cinematic futurity, that it comes to stand for by proxy. In a way, what makes this process of subtraction so meaningful and worthy of attention is exactly the density of meaning that photography itself gets imbued with for Shanto. As I previously argued, here photography is never just photography, period. By means of a combination of immediacy, easy accessibility, and overall closeness to the broader realm of cinema itself, it rather functions as the proxy for Shanto’s bigger, yet far more distant, dream of crafting a future for himself in the movie industry, ideally by becoming an esteemed and famous movie director. If this stance might be safely read as yet another manifestation of Shanto’s inherently cruel relations of optimism – one where the object of attachment gets simply displaced onto something else, but where the overall mechanism of cruelty-in-attachment stays the same²⁵³ –, where I find myself leaving cruelty behind is not in attachment per se, as, rather, in *subtraction*. It is in the conscious act of subtraction – of denying me permission to share his photos in these pages, as well as of not producing other photos specifically for me to show in these pages – that, I argue, a certain kindness towards the self can be located. Only by preserving the absence of the image – by proxy: of his dream job, his futurity, his ultimate project of ‘the good life’ – can Shanto keep alive his own version of kindness towards the self: not so much, or not only, that one day he will work again with cinematic viscosity and eventually become a famous director; but crucially that, even if not, his photos nonetheless do not forever belong to a PhD thesis such as this, where both the fallibility of his aspirations and his contested sexuality get to be so thoroughly scrutinized and permanently fixed in time, via writing. Sexuality becomes again key here: it is, in fact, sexuality the assemblage upon which Shanto’s right to remain in Italy had to rest, albeit against his will, and by trapping him, in the process, in the narrow

²⁵³ That is, one where attachment simply shifts from migration to cinema.

confines of both refugeeness and lgbt-ness, of both migratory and sexual identity. It is, again, sexuality the element that constantly risks making him stand out as different from others, while all he would rather be is ‘normal’ – accomplished, successful, famous, even, but normal nonetheless. It is, once more, sexuality the ‘culprit’ that determined his exit from the world of the image and the screen in the first place, while he was still living and working in Dhaka. In light of all this, it starts to become clearer how, for Shanto, subtracting himself from a project that sparked off as a meditation, first and foremost, on his defiant sexuality, as well as on the fallible relation between his sexuality and his project of mobility away from Bangladesh, both is and is not about the need to protect his safety by remaining closeted. It is also about the strict logics of SOGI asylum; about class-related concerns of respectability and normality; about grand aspirations for the future – these, too, no less influenced by class and social status; but also, about a certain sense of respect and optimism for the self, which thrives in visuality, and whose significance, a heuristic of cruelty cannot entirely exhaust.

And indeed, not incidentally, as the following longer interview excerpt further illuminates, the one enacted by Shanto turns out to be a much more complex act of subtraction than one of simple visual refusal and disappearance. It is, in fact, a subtraction which is visual, spatial, and temporal, all at the same time (interview, 06/24):

S: You know, when I now, you know... When I talk to these things, I don't feel to enjoy, because it's not something I feel bad for my heart. It's more like, you know, *I want to share the story of mine, but not now*. [I want to share it] when I will become successful. If I share my story now, it's more like I'm trying to get the sympathy from others, you know? It's my thought. "Oh noo, poor boy! You faced so many problems". I really don't want that. I'm very much convinced to do my fight. But when I will be successful, everyone will be "Oh! Bravo! [he claps his hands] You faced some many things and you didn't stop!" So, I really want to [be] successful in my life, to build this story in front of everyone! See: what you see in front of you, that was not the same, way back!

V: By successful, what do you mean? What does it mean for you to be successful?

S: For me successful is not about the money. I know I can have money. For me, successful is what I dream of. When I fulfill my dream, it will be a success. The success is getting the recognition. I want to be a filmmaker. I have a thought of filmmaking... I have, I have been involved... For me, I really wanted to share my story, what I faced in my childhood. [...] But I am not a good writer. I don't have the patience to write a book, so I choose what I enjoy. Because I enjoy the lights, the actions. That's in me... And that's why I want to be a filmmaker. I wanted to be an actor, that's why I wanted to be famous... Through telling my story through a film... And to me, to be successful means to get the attention that I really want.

The deferral described above represents another dimension of where a passage from *cruel optimism* to *kindness* takes place: a strategy of self-preservation, in anticipation of a future when Shanto will be able to tell his story exclusively in his own terms, without risking being pitied, and without the need for my mediation – or for that of any other kind of academy-sanctioned writing, for that matter

– to be present. It is not so much that Shanto escapes academic attention tout court, or that he resists the retelling of his story in this thesis; but rather, that the attention that Shanto truly wants – because, indeed, he wants it – is one that this thesis will never be able to give him. He thus protects his photos, preserves their visuality for other eyes to see, and, in doing so, delays the moment when his story will be publicly told in its entirety and freely associated to him. He defers, in other words, this narrative moment to an otherwise unspecified time in the future, when he will eventually reach what he identifies as a position of “success” (see the interview quoted above). As already explored earlier on in the discussion, what Patricia Prieto-Blanco (2021, pp. 333-339) theorizes as a research subject’s “right to disappear” proves again crucial here, although Shanto relies on it in a slightly more ambivalent modality than what the original theorization envisages. It is, in fact, a right that Shanto makes the most out of, but that he also contradicts at the same time. He does so by willingly, if not outright self-centeredly, putting up his own personal performances for this research, rather than by fully disappearing from it. Contrary to what this discussion of subtraction may have seemed to suggest so far, Shanto repeatedly and explicitly renovates his consent to participate in this work, and always does so in enthusiastic manners: he derives pleasure from being interviewed and insistently prompts me to ask him more questions; he reveals a certain pride in being interpellated as a relevant interlocutor, first by me, and then by another group of Italian researchers working on a different project; he talks non-stop for hours, even if encouraged by the smallest of the stimuli. And yet, he nonetheless systematically negates this research direct access to the realm of visuality, as well as to his own story as expressed through visuality. In a reverse of the “show, don’t tell” imperative so popular in contemporary creative writing nowadays (see e.g., Zwicky, 2021), Shanto thus leaves me – the aspiring visual ethnographer of his sexual mobility – to handle the burden of a way more literal “tell, don’t show” duty: an inscribing of opaque wordiness over visuality, which can aspire to make justice to Shanto’s story and desires only in part, through yet another iteration of cruel optimism: this time, my own, the researcher’s. As such, mine, too, is an aspiration inevitably destined to fail and to concomitantly yield its fair share of frustration and suffering. It is also, in proper cruel optimism fashion, one that I cannot renounce, constituting as it does the condition of existence and livability of both this work and my researcher persona, respectively.

Coming back to Shanto, what I believe this analysis ultimately reveals is the following: he relies on his right to disappear as a right to appear, *but not now*; as a right to appear, *but not through visuality*. It is visuality, in fact, the one precious thing that he has to salvage at all costs. Shanto is thus suspending not so much the writing of his story, as, rather, the display of his story; the public and visible association between his story and his present self; between his story, his present self, and what he cherishes the most, what comprises the most precious facet of his own self, present, past and future:

his photos, and the coveted futurity that they stand for, and index, by proxy. Shanto thus delays this properly visual appearance of his to an unspecified moment in time, a moment when “success” will allow him to fully appear, in and through all of the visual potency that his art and creativity exude²⁵⁴. And even if this coveted success were never to come for Shanto, by subtracting his visual self from the forever-fixed materiality of this thesis, he is nonetheless already softening the blow that such a failure would come with – this one, a proper iteration of kindness towards the self, indeed.

To sum up and conclude this section, a paradoxical iteration has been at play here, all throughout the layered and complex research relationality flowing between Shanto and me: one which thrives in both visibility and its very negation. By denying me, the researcher, the possibility to display the visual materiality and contents of his cruelly optimistic attachments to mobility (his photos, i.e., the most powerful available representation of such failing attachments), Shanto is practicing what I believe can be identified as a well-thought and deliberate form of kindness, whose only recipient is – fairly enough – no one but himself. By subtracting visibility from the forever-fixed materiality that the act of writing itself entails, he is in fact taking his distances from cruel optimism, from that same cruel optimism that the photos materialize and put out there in the world, potentially for everyone’s eyes to see. It is a kindness that works, as such, in the immediate present, and that perhaps will again turn into something cruel soon. However, against the backdrop of the enduring fixation of presentness that the process of writing inevitably produces, it works as a form of kindness nonetheless – perhaps as the only one available to him, both for the time being, and for the forever-present time materializing in, and materialized by, the academically written page. At one point during her already mentioned reflections on the ethics of participatory visual research, Patricia Prieto-Blanco (2021, p. 336) posits to both herself and her reader a question which I deem crucial here: “I cannot avoid to wonder” – she admits – “is there a way to emplace narratives without imposing the burden of enduring presence onto research participants?”. As Shanto’s case seems to suggest, perhaps, there isn’t. It is left to the ethnographer, in collaboration with the participant himself, to negotiate how much and what kind of burden is ethically reasonable to impose, and to then disentangle the outcomes that this same imposition produces – outcomes which are not always straightforward or coherent. Hence, here in this discussion of Shanto’s trajectories of life and/in mobility, not only have I tried to ensure his right to (visually) disappear from research; I have coterminously also found myself compelled to taking up this right in and of itself as a pivotal object of scrutiny and analysis, with all the discrepancies that have conglomerated around this operation²⁵⁵.

²⁵⁴ Ironically enough, in the process of doing so, he stops being *shanto*. In a way, he never was *shanto* in the first place, as he, quite literally, never shuts up, and, at least through and in vocality, lets visibility and cinephilia enter the frame of this text and research more broadly.

²⁵⁵ What I find even more paradoxical is that I had to do so in order to more comprehensively – and thus, in a way, more ethically – make sense of Shanto’s life, as it unfolded in front of me, in and through research itself.

Now that it is over, I feel like that this long and tortuous process of negotiation has left me with a bitter realization to process: that the core of the problem of cruelty and of enduring presence might reside more in the nature of ethnographic research, than in any of Shanto's more or less realistic aspirations, desires, and figurations of the good life. "If I die today" – Shanto tells me at one point, during one of our most meaningful exchanges (interview, 06/23):

I die as person. I die as a number. Every... There's so many people [that]... When I talk, every nanosecond people are dying. Just [as a] number. But I don't want to die as a number. I want to create something that will live me along. Man [*sic*] is not immortal, but the creation is immortal. I want to be immortal through my creation.

As these powerful declarations further stress, enduring presence is not necessarily a burden *per se*. Shanto wants it – he craves it, even – but only in his own terms, through an act of creation that will be his, and his alone. The burdensome nature of presence, then, gets activated by the imperatives of research, more than anything else: by my presence as a writer of someone else's life, and by my attempts at tapping into ethnography as the preferred tool to complete this operation. When looking back at the entire picture from this angle, then, where the most insidious bouts of cruelty really seem to lie is within the ethnographic endeavor in and of itself: in ethnography's cruel optimism in its own capacity to account for someone else's life in writing. In its obstinacy in arrogating this right for itself, even; in the limitations that emerge when it attempts to do so; and, ultimately, in ethnography's constant, internal push to nonetheless try and circumvent these same exact limitations. More than anything else, it is thus against ethnography that Shanto's composite, strategic project of appearance-in-disappearance and visual subtraction happens – and, while it happens, it takes a turn away from cruel optimism, into a genuine and heartfelt motion of kindness towards the self. A kindness that, from my positionality as researcher, I could ethnographically respect only in part.

4.4. Muneeb. Yet Another Case for Cruel Optimism? Migration as Wanting What One Already Has

"My life started when I saw a dream" Muneeb tells me in his feeble voice, almost a whisper, when I invite him to go through the story of his life for me while sitting at the table of a noisy, run-down café in Rome. "I wanted to study abroad, like every Indian, every Pakistani, every Bangladeshi, because they were tired of their country. They were thinking that every country is *better* than their country" (interview, 01/25). As these few initial words alone already begin to hint at, Muneeb's, too, is a narrative of migration that originates from a tropeic iteration of betterness of the sorts that I opened up this chapter with, and that I have already extensively discussed in reference to Shanto's path to mobility from Bangladesh to Italy. In Muneeb's specific case, it is one taking the form of the

initial conviction that any place outside Pakistan would provide him with better opportunities to improve his academic formation (see e.g., Bartlett et al., 2018, p. 448)²⁵⁶. For this same reason, it is a narrative that also partially stands out from those of the majority of my other research interlocutors, as it is the pursuit of higher education – rather than any other kind of explicitly gender/sexuality-related reasons – to figure not only as the primary, most prominent driving force in Muneeb’s decision to move away from Pakistan and relocate to Italy, but also as the institutionally-recognized tool that enables this same decision to be actualized in the first place. Contrary to what has been seen for other participants so far, Muneeb reaches Italy with a study visa after having formally enrolled in a master’s degree program at an Italian university – in other words, through a mobility path that authorities identify as both legal and legitimate, and that, at least in theory, sets Muneeb’s migration trajectory apart from those of asylum claimants and refugees (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.), as well as of other ‘low-skilled’ ‘labor’ migrants from Pakistan (see e.g., Ahmad, 2009; 2011) and South Asia more broadly (see e.g., King and Della Puppa, 2020; Priori, Mapril, and Della Puppa, 2021). As it will become clearer further on in the discussion, this is a differentiation that impacts the frequency, modalities, and means of travel that Muneeb relies on, the structures of reception that he can and cannot access, as well as the work, housing, and social systems that he finds himself traversing once in Italy. Predictably enough, however, that of pursuing a better education through migration is a rationale that hides behind itself much more than just a preoccupation with the quality of one’s own academic training. This same preoccupation should rather be understood as inextricably linked to a bigger, more convoluted whole: one which contains mobility at its very core (see Baas, 2016), and where the gender/sexuality assemblage, too, eventually infiltrates, albeit diagonally – as something, that is to say, that is coterminously both inside and outside the purview of Muneeb’s migration rationale²⁵⁷. It is this diagonal posture assumed by ‘queerness’ in Muneeb’s trajectory of mobility, together with Muneeb’s insistent motions of attachment to freedom of mobility in and of itself as something to be achieved through an act of migration ‘West’, that make his case one particularly apt to be discussed through the double-edged lens of the *everything but* heuristic of sexuality (khanna, 2016) and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), as delineated in the introductory sections of this chapter (see Section 4.2.2.).

After having devoted a great deal of attention to people whose trajectories of sexual migration eventually made them qualify as SOGI refugees – albeit seldom easily and unproblematically –, I thus now want to turn the discussion to Muneeb as the (apparently) most ‘peripheral’ and stand-alone

²⁵⁶ More specifically, scholars working on migration and education have advanced the so-called ‘optimism hypothesis’, according to which early generations of migrants tend to view education as a key pathway to upward social mobility – a belief that in turn strengthens students’ sense of agency (Bartlett et al., 2018).

²⁵⁷ I am taking up this idea of diagonality from Vaibhav Saria (2021), who formulates in relation to Indian hijras communities and their relationality to the rest of society.

interlocutor that this research has brought in front of me²⁵⁸. I do so both because of the relevance of Muneeb's story in and of itself – a relevance which exists regardless of the interests addressed by the present academic work; but also in a more theoretically-motivated move to complicate the often taken for granted equation of sexual migration *as* SOGI asylum (see e.g., Lelleri and Pozzoli, 2009a; see also Introduction), as well as the oftentimes paradoxical, yet ever-entangled webs of relationalities between im/mobility, fantasies of the good life, and (everything but) 'queerness', that this research itself rests upon. In the subsequent sections, I will go through Muneeb's migration journey – a journey towards mobility, as much as immobility – highlighting both its peculiar features and, ultimately, its commonalities with other participants' paths to sexual migration: the hopes, delusions, and disappointments that traverse them, and the bouts of cruel optimism that motivate them, as much as they hinder them.

4.4.1. From Student to Migrant: Retracing Muneeb's Path into Italian Im/mobility

Delving more in depth into Muneeb's backstory will allow me to take a first step into clarifying what makes his im/mobility journey both different from, and at the same time incredibly similar to, other paths of sexual migration via SOGI asylum encountered in this work so far.

An extremely young-looking Pakistani boy in his late twenties, as anticipated, Muneeb reaches Italy through a student visa in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the clear intent of further pursuing his higher education 'abroad': that is, anywhere other than in Pakistan²⁵⁹. Drawn to Italy primarily by the cheap costs of its academic system – infinitely cheaper if compared to what young, relatively affluent Pakistanis like him would consider to be much more appealing destinations, such as the U.S., Canada, or Australia –, Muneeb ends up enrolling in a Master's in Genetics from a high-ranked Italian institution that he knew nothing about, and located in a provincial-turned-international university town that he had never heard of before. And yet, his apparently straightforward and rather privileged path to transnational mobility – surely privileged when compared to other participants' dire migratory routes through Turkey, Eastern Europe, Libya, and the Central Mediterranean – ends up, instead, meting out Muneeb with a treatment no less cruel than those conventionally associated to other, more precarious paths of 'forced' movement and/or escape. In fact, the dream that Muneeb

²⁵⁸ Muneeb is not the only participant whose path of migration does not involve SOGI asylum. Throughout the course of research conduction, I have also engaged with several other people who either refused applying for asylum, or reached Italy during their childhood or teenage years via different migration channels (e.g. family reunification), and started to discover their sexualities later on in Italy. Their stories – for many aspects perhaps more adjacent to those of so-called 'second generations' – eventually could not be included in the corpus of this work, for reasons of space and thematic coherence. They would, however, deserve their own spot within the fields of (queer) migration and diaspora studies, where they currently constitute rather understudied avenues of investigation (see Introduction).

²⁵⁹ Before leaving for Italy, Muneeb already owned several degrees from Pakistani universities, including another master.

saw²⁶⁰ – and which he takes as to virtually mark the beginning of his (new) life – soon turns for him into what he does not hesitate to define as both an absolute “nightmare” and a “scam” (interview, 01/25; fieldnotes, 01/25). If the two years that he spends studying for his degree go by somehow smoothly – he gets allotted a scholarship and accommodation in the university residence, manages to build a small circle of international friends, and overall enjoys the life that his neat student town affords him –, Muneeb’s graduation marks, instead, a severe downfall of his living and psychological conditions, and of the severest kind. As he gets thrown out of his student accommodation the moment he gets his degree, a virtually never-ending cycle of moving-cum-suffering begins, one where switching from small job to small job goes hand in hand with going from (denied) attempt to rent a room to (denied) attempt to rent a room, and which leaves Muneeb deeply traumatized and entirely deprived of all of his reserves of physical and psychological strength.

This is, indeed, the dire status that I find him in when I first meet him at the end of 2024 – more than four years into his stay in Italy – on the occasion of one of his appointments at the Rainbow Hub, the lgbt+ association where I am volunteering as a cultural and linguistic mediator at the time, concomitantly with the conduction of my PhD research. As I later find out, he had turned to the association hoping to receive some sort of support in his desperate quest to find a house and a better job in Rome, after several other failed attempts at getting help elsewhere – attempts which ranged in scale from local police stations, to ministries, up until UN-based agencies. He thus did so less out of a sense of belonging to, and/or identification with, the lgbt+ ‘community’, than as a last resort to try and improve his life conditions, which had been fully deteriorated, at that point, by the pervasive discrimination that he had been hit by for months on end while looking for a house and a job all over Italy. Muneeb himself traces such discrimination back to two primary dimensions: to his Pakistani nationality and migrant status, on the one hand, and to his easily clockable ‘queerness’, on the other²⁶¹ – this latter one, significantly enough, an element that he almost invariably associates to his “soft, feminine voice” (fieldnotes, 01/25) and overall innocent attitude and effeminate demeanor, rather than to desires, feelings, a peculiar sexual orientation and/or gendered identification, or other similar iterations of sexual/gendered interiority (see e.g., Dutta and Roy, 2014). And indeed, the two years prior to our first meeting were marked for him by a long and exhausting cycle of more-than-unpleasant accidents, most of which racially- and/or sexually-motivated: he fell prey to a rental scam which made him lose a consistent amount of money and left him homeless; he got continuously laid off jobs

²⁶⁰ The use of the verb ‘to see’ constitutes a literal translation from the Hindi/Urdu *sapnā dekhnā*, lit. ‘to see a dream’, i.e., ‘to dream’.

²⁶¹ Like most of my interlocutors, Muneeb does not use the terms queer and queerness in reference to himself. ‘Queerness’, in his case, is less something that stems from the inside, than an attribute coercively attached to him by others. In fact, he explains to me that he is still not sure whether he likes boys or girls or both, that he might want to marry one day, but that he is overall not that interested in sex tout court.

(mostly seasonal occupations in restaurants and hotels), or paid too little to make something meaningful out of them; and he had to endure innumerable episodes of explicit racism, islamophobia, and homo- and effemino-phobia from employers, workmates, landlords, and roommates – for instance, as when some colleagues tricked him into unknowingly eating pork, or scornfully mocked him by pretending to solicit sex favors from him in front of customers. When I first meet Muneeb, his working and housing conditions are indeed still extremely precarious: he has managed to get hired as a *servizio civile* volunteer in a hospital²⁶² – a position which pays little money and does not give him any guarantees of future hiring in the field –, while the Rainbow Hub social workers had to find for him a temporary living spot in a project designated to host people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness: a bunk-bed in a shared room with a bunch of other men that Muneeb systematically labels, not without a consistent dose of ill-concealed contempt, as dirty, ignorant, uneducated ‘refugees’. This last point in particular gets understood by Muneeb himself as the most glaring symptom of his downfall from the respectable upper-middle-class status and highly-valued social position that he used to enjoy back home in Pakistan, to the miserable life that he has now been consigned to in Italy.

As it already begins to emerge from this picture, several different layers come and intersect in shaping Muneeb’s dramatic and self-consuming experiences in Italy, as an international student first, and as a ‘migrant’ right after²⁶³. As seen for virtually every other participant so far, class and social status more broadly – always understood as part of a bigger whole, together with migratory status, race, as well as gender/sexuality – are perhaps the most impactful ones of all. According to the reconstruction that he makes of his own past, while living in Pakistan, Muneeb used to be “always on the top”: he had studied more than anyone else in his circles, and owned multiple university degrees; he used to have “a lot of ego” and a beautiful house where he grew up surrounded by the love of his mother and sisters; he even had a driver; but, most importantly of all, he would be respected, if not, at times, reverently feared, by everyone around him (interviews 01/25; 04/25). And yet, by migrating ‘West’ in an attempt to further improve this sense of social, material, and psychological wealth characterizing his everyday life back home, he actually ends up “los[ing] everything”, instead: “my health, my mental health, my hair, my complexion, my attitude, my ego...” (interview, 01/25). As the opposite scenario to the one migration was supposed to materialize becomes true, Muneeb finds himself

²⁶² In Italy, the so-called Universal Civil Service (*Servizio Civile Universale*) is a volunteering public program that allows young people aged 18 to 28 to participate in one-year-long projects of social, cultural, environmental, and civic value, based either in Italy or abroad. Originating as a non-military alternative to compulsory conscription, today, its declared aims are to promote active citizenship, social cohesion, and personal development through community-based service among the Italian youth.

²⁶³ For a more thorough explanation to the critical approach to migration categories that I take up and expound throughout this work and beyond, see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

depleted of most of his resources, and unable to accept the irreducible downfall in class and social status that four years in Italy have produced for him. As already anticipated, it is a downfall so dire that it ultimately determines for Muneeb to be lumped together with people he looks down on as “uneducated” and “dirty” “refugees” (fieldnotes, 01/25; 04/25) – and not only on a discursive terrain, but also on a material one, forced as he is to share cramped room after cramped room with them, inside the temporary shelters that social workers periodically manage to find for him in Rome²⁶⁴. And yet, in this discursive operation that Muneeb performs against ‘refugees’ – it should be noted, not without a good deal of arrogance and superiority from his part – something else is at play, too. In fact, I want to argue, this is exactly one of the junctures where the gender/sexuality assemblage diagonally begins to enter the trajectory of Muneeb’s im/mobility to Italy, in all of the strength of its *everything but* nature (see khanna, 2016).

If it is true that Muneeb’s contempt against his unprecedented proximity to ‘refugees’ is the result of class-fueled biases, as well as of the mismatch between his expectations about moving and the reality of what his migration move, instead, actually ends up entailing, it is equally true that, for him, such a contempt is additionally informed and aggravated by a looming threat of effeminophobic and homophobic violence, which constantly haunts his post-graduation life in Italy. Not too dissimilarly from what would happen to Sam during his childhood (see Chapter 2.2.), or to Atif both in his Pakistani hometown and inside his male-only SAI ‘camp’ in Rome (see Chapter Two, Section 2.3; Chapter Three, Section 3.2.2.), Muneeb is so easily clocked in his effeminacy and “innocence” (interview, 01/25) as not-enough-of-a-man, that he is systematically made the target of unsolicited attention, insults, as well as serious threats of physical and sexual violence by coworkers, employers, and potential landlords, as well as by the other male guests of the reception facilities that he finds himself compelled to live in. What makes Muneeb’s case stand out from others seen so far, however, is the immediacy of the association that he draws between queerphobia *and* migration, physical and psychological violence *and* Italy. Contrary to what trite iterations of the so-called “‘*queer migration to liberation nation*’ narrative” (Murray, 2016, ‘Introduction’, emphasis in the original) would leave space for, when it comes to Muneeb, ‘queerness’ only emerges as a problematic cluster in migration, rather than ‘back home’: that is, where and when Muneeb cannot count anymore on any of the protective layers that in Pakistan – in the narrativization of his life in Pakistan that he makes for me, at least – would

²⁶⁴ Employed as synonym for ‘migrant’ and laden with a particularly negative connotation, here, ‘refugee’ loses all of its implications as a legal category of migration management, and acquires a purely heuristic valence instead. In fact, for Muneeb, it comes to represent the space of utmost alterity from which he constantly strives to distance himself, but which he somehow paradoxically also ends up envying at the same time. Not only does he deem ‘refugees’ to be poor, dirty, uneducated people, forced to reach Italy through traumatizing journeys that end up affecting their mental health and behaviors; but he is also jealous of them, to an extent, because they are granted access to an entire structured system of support, that he feels is instead entirely lacking when it comes to him.

prevent his gender non-conformity and sexual confusion to even become seeable and relevant in the first place, and to thus be consequently weaponized against him. As Muneeb would have it, in Pakistan, his well-fed ego, his properties and wealth, his education, his family's support – in other words, his highly respectable social status – would indeed guarantee that his gender defiance remain a non-issue, hard to mobilize, as such, against him and the shield of respectability that used to surround him. However, in migration – i.e., when and where this respectability gets stripped off of him most violently – his gender non-conformity, feeble voice, innocent demeanor, and gentle mannerisms, all immediately turn him into a perfect target of oppression and queerphobia, as they get systematically enforced against him by both Italians and 'refugees' alike. Against this backdrop of newfound vulnerability and class-downfall that migration produces for him, the discursive devaluation that Muneeb carries out against 'refugees' thus becomes part of a broader operation, through which he attempts to make sense of the ugly treatment that gets accorded to him and the visibility of his 'queerness' in Italy: an operation involving the sequestering of queerphobia away from Pakistan and into Italy, and, among Pakistanis in Italy and migrants more broadly, into those people that he deems ignorant and close-minded, when not outright traumatized and mentally-ill – i.e., those that he indiscriminately lumps together under the banner of the 'refugee'.

As the picture drawn so far begins to illuminate, then, in Muneeb's case queerness – as it does or does not take visible shape, before, in, and after migration – proves to be, once again, a function of everything else that queerness is not (see khanna, 2016), and this time in a particularly evident manner. Crucially, this is as true for Muneeb's pre-migration life, when and where queerness *can afford not to matter*, exactly because it constitutes *everything but* queerness; as it is true for his Italy-based experiences, throughout which queerness *cannot not matter*, and for the exact same reason. The workings of queerness' *everything but* nature thus remain the same; what change are the conditions and referents of its functionability, that is, of its standing for everything else that queerness is not (see earlier on in this chapter, Section 4.2.2.): for social, economic, familial, and psychological wealth in Pakistan; and for racial, class, labor, and mental destitution in Italy. To many, Muneeb's would barely count as a journey to sexual migration (Carrillo, 2017) in the first place: after all, his migration move is not one explicitly motivated by gender/sexuality-related reasons (see Gorman-Murray, 2009, p. 443), and neither does Muneeb unproblematically self-identifies as belonging to the social, discursive, and embodied worlds of queerness and/or lgbt-ness. And yet, in line with the overall epistemological perspective that I have been embracing all throughout this work, I argue, sexual migration it must be. Better yet, *everything but* sexual migration (see section 4.4.2. of this thesis): a journey – in this case, downward – in which the gender/sexuality assemblage can alternatively disappear or

emerge, only to the extent to which it gets unmasked as standing for something ‘else’: for class, race, respectability, wealth, power, and more.

The fact that this whole set of understandings – about both himself and others – gets produced by Muneeb also, though not exclusively, through the reductionist apprehension of ‘refugees’ as a homogenous cluster of dirty, uneducated, and close-minded individuals²⁶⁵ renders it a very uncomfortable juncture to navigate in research, but also one that I find imperative to address. At this point of the discussion, I could indeed simply stop and call out the problematic nature of Muneeb’s biases, and of the conclusions that he draws from them²⁶⁶. This is, however, an operation that I am not really interested in carrying out here like this, in isolation. I rather want to point out how, also by way of being ‘problematic’, this juncture of Muneeb’s narratives can prove instructive in the context of this research. More specifically, on two different, if always related, plains of research conduction itself: an ethical-methodological one, and another more strictly thematical one. When it comes to the former, what I want to advocate for is a form of ethnographic respect towards research subjects, whom shall not become the banners for the researcher’s own political projects. As Ellen Lewin (2016) brilliantly calls out in her critique of queer anthropology’s predilection for ethnographic subjects whose conceptions about ‘queerness’ ought to match the same radical anti-normativity espoused by the researcher (see Chapter Three, Section 3.3.2.), this risk is particularly real when something like ‘queerness’ is at stake – even more real, I would venture to suggest, when ‘queerness’ is associated to migrant/geographically mobile subjectivities. Rather than flattening participants’ individualities so that they can fit the researcher’s political project, no matter how noble the latter might be²⁶⁷, I am, in fact, way more keen to convey the sometimes ‘ugly’ complexities of individuals as I encountered them in the field; to borrow directly from Lewin’s words (2016, p. 605), to do so “even if they don’t embrace outrageousness or seek to separate themselves from normative social and moral standards in a way we find exciting”. Practically speaking, then, I am actively shying away from simplistically making ‘sexual migrants’ – specifically Muneeb here, but the argument can be extended to the entirety of this work – either the emblems of queer resistance, the unaware victims of a system that crushes them, or the turned-perpetrators of acts of discursive violence against others further ‘lower in rank’ than them:

²⁶⁵ These are all characterizations that Muneeb has attributed to them throughout the course of our meetings and conversations.

²⁶⁶ Having found myself in front of such a bitter scorn for the vaguely invoked category of the ‘refugee’, and having had to navigate the discomfort that this stance came with for me personally, I had to actively caution my researcher-self against simplistically judge Muneeb’s stances and dismiss them as ‘problematic’. Indeed, my ethical and academic duty here should not be so much to chastise Muneeb, as rather, through Muneeb’s story – ultimately, a story which is just as worthy of respect as others – to attempt to uncover some of the uncomfortable, but nonetheless structural frictions that emerge in migration: in this specific instance, in sexual migration from South Asia to Italy, but potentially across many other different contexts of transnational mobility, too.

²⁶⁷ In the case of this research, for instance, to advocate for freedom of movement and of sexual/gender self-expression for everybody.

in fact, as Muneeb's case perfectly exemplifies, they are more likely to be all these of things at the same time, and more²⁶⁸.

The second plain where a careful analysis of Muneeb's difficult stances proves particularly meaningful is, instead, more strictly content-driven than ethical and methodological. Indeed, I want to argue, by delving into the strategies that Muneeb relies on to make sense of his newfound oppression in migration, as well as of the failure of his migratory endeavor tout court – no matter how 'problematic' these strategies might be, or exactly because they turn out to be so 'problematic' –, it becomes possible to further address the structural flaws affecting the broader global framework of im/mobility that Muneeb himself traverses, as a student, first, and as a migrant, later; but also, the discursive and material complicities with the system that migrants, too, often end up developing. By distancing himself from people who, in Pakistan, would most likely be considered much lower in status than him, but that he is discursively and materially confounded with, now that he lives in Italy, Muneeb is clearly attempting to reinstate his once-respectable positionality – at least in narrative, at least in front of me. Indeed, Italian actors and infrastructures of migration management, as well as most of Italy's general population, see little to no difference between Muneeb – between his university degrees, his demeanor, his family background – and other, more or less anonymous Pakistani labor migrants and refugees: in migration, indicators of class and respectability get in fact obfuscated by the combined workings of racist, classist, and anti-immigration discourses, which only manage to apprehend people-in-mobility as belonging to an indistinct mass of victims to be saved, or imposters to be pushed back (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2.). What Muneeb's case sheds further light on is how the logics of such discourses dominating the Italian socio-political landscape belong to Italian publics and institutions, as much as they belong to Muneeb himself, striving as he does to refute them only to the extent that they fail to recognize and account for his exceptionality: his once-prized respectable position and high social status, which differentiate him from other migrants. On top of that, the limited workings of Italian migration management can only further contribute to nurture Muneeb's resentment against 'refugees': not being a refugee himself, he is, in fact, excluded from accessing infrastructures of *accoglienza*, and this certainly plays a role in making his life in Italy extremely difficult once that his student-visa holder privileges end (fieldnotes, 01/24; see also Chapter Three). Arranged

²⁶⁸ This is, I believe, what a properly subjectivity-centered approach to the study of migrations should also entail (see Mezzadra 2001; 2004; see also Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, pp. 83-85; Fontanari, 2019; Garella and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2013b; Pinelli, 2017, pp. 11-15): sitting with the discomfort of engaging with research interlocutors (in this case: with 'migrants') as *people*: as both subjects and subjected, as both suffering individuals and individuals who make others suffer. Crucially enough, as people that we might not always 'like', and whose vision of the world might not necessarily match with ours. In fact, it is also in this opening towards migrants' uncompromised humanness that I locate the ethical vocation of the present research. Otherwise, as scholars, we risk endorsing the same appalling rhetoric of citizenship, refugeeeness, and freedom of movement as things that people have to prove to be deserving of, not only by becoming exemplars of the 'good citizen' (Marchetti, 2020), but of the 'good research subject', too.

as it is to welcome ‘authentic’ refugees and ‘vulnerable’ asylum claimants only, Italy’s reception system leaves outside of its scope of intervention many other categories of migrants who, like Muneeb, are deemed as not vulnerable enough and whose mobility is assessed as not ‘forced’ enough, but who paradoxically end up becoming ever more vulnerable exactly by way of their exclusion from the purview of *accoglienza* itself (Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021, p. 507; Pinelli, 2017, p. 19). In all of their complicated, at times unpleasant character, then, Muneeb’s negative stances on his migration experience in Italy ultimately prove to be the result of his own deep-seated class-dependent biases and prejudices, as much as the manifestation – one among many possible manifestations, for sure – of the effects produced by a global system of im/mobility management, conceived to strictly regulate who can move – and where, and why, and how, and how fast – and who cannot: a game of mobility-cum-vulnerability, in which citizenship, wealth, class, race, gender, sexuality, among other things, all play their part, albeit not always in easily predictable ways.

In conclusion, broad schemes for migration management and their tight logics turn out to lie, once again, at the core of extremely personal paths to transnational migration, determining their developments and outcomes often in directions much different from those initially contemplated by migrants themselves. In fact, more often than not – and as already amply argued in relation to Shanto’s story (see Section 4.3.2.) – transnational regimes of movement and non-movement prove to be structurally programmed to deny migrants the same promises that allow for their journeys to be imagined in the first place (Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019), a leitmotiv that Muneeb’s downward-facing trajectory of migration from Pakistan to Italy does not manage to escape. Migration is, in other words, structurally dependent on, and further reproducing, in turn, relations of cruel optimism (Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019; see Berlant, 2011) – ones in which gender/sexuality, too, can become yet another cog in the machine. If Shanto’s story has already amply illuminated this conundrum, Muneeb’s experiences, albeit different in many respects, can contribute to shedding further light on it from a perspective distinct from asylum-sanctioned routes of mobility. Indeed, as I will further clarify in the remaining sections of this work, albeit existing outside and against the socio-legal confines of refugeeness which have mostly been covered by the present research so far, Muneeb’s, too, is a path of migration that in institutionally sanctioned im/mobility painfully trudges – and stops, and then trudges some more, and then stops again. Having provided a first glimpse into Muneeb’s trajectory of migration from Pakistan to Italy, it is thus to a more explicit and detailed apprehension of the cruelly optimistic and paradoxically im/mobile character of his migratory path that I will now turn my analysis to.

4.4.2. Getting Stuck while Reaching for the Sky: Cosmopolitan South Asian Youth and the Italian Scam

It is an insanely hot July afternoon in Rome when Muneeb and I meet for lunch. I am virtually done with fieldwork by then, but we still have some catching up to do after not having met in person for a few months²⁶⁹. I am trying to give him some feedback on the PhD proposal that he is planning to submit to an Australian professor as part of a bigger plan to leave Italy for good, when Muneeb starts asking questions about *my* PhD. I point out to him that, indeed, he already knows the topic I am researching: lgbt+ people who migrated from Pakistan to Italy. As soon as I utter these words, however, he bursts out laughing in my face: “How can you do this?” he asks me, his laugh almost hysterical, “You don’t know anything about it! Pakistan is the number one gay country in the world!” I rebut: what does he mean I don’t know anything? How can he tell? “Because you are not from Pakistan!” he explains, still laughing. I try to insist, but he becomes elusive: “Let it go”, he says. But I am determined not to let this interaction slip away like that: I am interested in all of these things, I insist, I want to know what he means. He finally admits it: people have lied to me for sure, he says in a tone somewhere between amusement and self-assurance – because I am Italian, white, and a woman: I can sense that this is what he is hinting at, even if he does not say it out loud. He wants to know what my other research interlocutors have told me about themselves, he continues, but I retort that I cannot give this kind of information away like that. His follow-up question, then, becomes more direct: have people told me that they are happy here in Italy? When I admit to him that many are not – not as much as they thought they would be, at least – his attitude changes significantly. Easing up and taking on a more serious tone at the same time, “Then, *they did not lie*”, he concedes.

Both while it was happening, as well as later on in hindsight, this small, unplanned interaction with Muneeb felt and still feels like a test: one that I somehow happened to pass, albeit at the very last moment and against all odds. It is a test that also contains, buried not too deep within itself, the seeds of some of the most crucial junctures of this research, which I will now set out to unpack.

Attributing to me and my socio-relational alterity a fundamental incapacity to comprehend the thickness of the gender/sexuality assemblage in the Pakistani context, Muneeb is convinced that my interlocutors have only told me lies: that they have fed me a trite, but ultimately false story of escape

²⁶⁹ I am referring to the last meeting between Muneeb and I, which occurred at the end of July, 2025. In the spring months preceding this meeting, we had kept in touch via phone-calls, messages, and social media because I was abroad. A few weeks afterwards, Muneeb eventually decided to go back to Pakistan – a decision that, at the time of writing, is still conceived as a temporary measure.

from the oppression and suffering of life in Pakistan – in reality, “the number one gay country in the world”, even! –, to the liberation and happiness of life in Italy. Surely enough, this is an assumption that might open up the discourse to potentially endless methodological reflections on both participants and researcher’s positionality, on the expectations that attach to both, as well as on the effects that such expectations produce in the field. And yet, here I rather want to focus on another set of critical issues that Muneeb’s declarations raise, no less meaningful than the former. The main reason why Muneeb assumes that people must have lied to me – incidentally, by telling me that they are happy in Italy and manage to lead successful lives there – is, I argue, because this is exactly the story that most migrants have to tell, both themselves and others, about migration: the forcefully uplifting tale that they are expected to perform during videocalls and/or visits home, in order not to fall short of social and familial expectations, and consequently lose dignity and respect in the eyes of others ‘back home’²⁷⁰ (Ahmad, 2009; 2011). Muneeb knows this well: crushed as he is by the burden of barely surviving in Italy, he is, at the same time, just as weighed down by the expectations of success – his and other people’s – that have attached to his migration journey, and that have made migration itself an endeavor just as impossible to be endured, as it is to be renounced. By projecting this paradox on my other interlocutors as well, he is thus more or less knowingly opening up a window into the cruel dynamics that push him – and many other ‘migrants’ like him – to keep on enduring in the dream that had once fueled their migratory aspirations, and that is now responsible, instead, for their staying stuck in some of the direst forms of human depletion: physical, psychological, social, and economic, all at the same time. In other words, it indirectly unveils the baseline of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), upon which Muneeb’s trajectory of (sexual) migration from Pakistan to Italy, too, is based off and still thrives on to this day.

As it has already started to emerge from the discussion carried out so far, Muneeb quite straightforwardly *hates* Italy. The effects of the multiple layers of bad, if not outright dramatic, experiences that he has found himself facing in the country, especially after his graduation, have indeed all flowed into a bitter, deep-rooted, and pervasive sense of resentment against Italian people and Italy as a whole – one which Muneeb does not hesitate to make manifest whenever he gets the chance to, and which eventually ends up occupying the largest amount of conversational space between the two of us, all throughout research conduction. Of all the people that I have engaged with for the making of this project, Muneeb has been, no doubt, the most determined and explicit one in identifying the treatment accorded to him in Italy as nothing short than racist, and to concomitantly and systematically depict Italians as ignorant, greedily attached to money – when not as thieves altogether –, and, overall, as a

²⁷⁰ As I will explore towards the end of this section, this is basically what will happen to Muneeb, too, once he goes back home ‘defeated’: that is, in worse social, economic, physical, and mental condition than when he left.

population whom he cannot get himself to trust anymore, virtually in its entirety. As he reluctantly yet eloquently admits to me one day: “I mean, Italian people are shit... But... I don’t want to say it, but... [they are]” (interview, 01/25). These and other similar statements, on top of meaningfully contributing to unmask an often-downplayed reality of systemic racism, historically widespread in the Italian context against people of color, migrants, and/or individuals with a migratory background (see e.g., Curcio 2024), also point to another fundamental juncture in Muneeb’s journey of im/mobility to Italy: he never “saw the dream” (interview, 01/25) to come to Italy in the first place – he wanted to go to Australia or to the U.S., as many other young and ambitious Pakistanis like him did – and he absolutely does not want to keep on living in the country, especially not now that he has gotten a real taste of what Italy and Italians are actually like, and of what life in Italy has in store for him. He was stupid – *so stupid!* – he tells me repeatedly in his delicate and sorrowful voice, when commenting both his decision to save money and choose Italy as his definitive destination, as well as other subsets of the mobility-related choices that he naively but obstinately undertook once inside the country (e.g., moving first to Milan and then to Rome to try and find a house and a job in a bigger city, eventually to no avail). It is precisely because of this self-diagnosed stupidity that he is now “stuck in this scam” (interview, 01/25): *forced* to stay in a country where not only is the quality of education low – professors at his university would not even speak proper English, and the degree that he got from there is “useless”, he repeatedly complains of. But where people are also systematically and blatantly racist and homophobic; where he cannot find a proper job, no matter how hard he tries; and where he is even left with no choice but to live in a cramped and dirty space with ‘uneducated’ ‘refugees’.

And yet, notwithstanding the pervasive, if not asphyxiating negativity-bordering-with-desperation that life in Italy has been producing for Muneeb – and that unfailingly comes to haunt Muneeb’s words every time we speak –, he proves to be just as reluctant *to stay*, as he is at the hypothetical prospect *to go*. Italy has been quite literally consuming his vital force; he neither can nor wants to keep living in the country anymore; and yet, he does not want to leave the country either – better yet, he *cannot* leave it, even if, technically and legally speaking, there is nothing preventing him from doing so²⁷¹. It is exactly here, at this apparently paradoxical juncture, that cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) once again makes its entrance, as the aptest lens to expose the nature of Muneeb’s social, mental, and spatial stuckness: of being “stuck in this scam”, and, by extension, of having invested all of his resources in a project which has ultimately proved to be of immobility, as much as it is of mobility. In order to understand what lies behind the cruelly optimistic motions of attachment keeping Muneeb stuck in Italy – all the while doing so is also virtually killing him, at the same time –, it is necessary

²⁷¹ For instance, refugees are legally prevented from going back to their country, lest they lose their refugee status in and of itself. Muneeb, on the contrary, faces no legal obstacles whatsoever, but this does not automatically imply that he ‘can’ go, as I will explore further in the discussion. It is here, in fact, that lies his own personal paradox of im/mobility.

to further contextualize Muneeb's migration move through two additional layers. First of all, it is a move aiming at two complementary, albeit different iterations of mobility itself: a social one, and a more literal spatial and geographic one; and secondly, it is one in which returning 'home', albeit technically possible, nonetheless represents a non-option for Muneeb, or, at least, the last resort which would come to mark the definitive failure of his mobility project 'West' in and of itself. Both of these dimensions – which do not exist in isolation, but rather feed off each other – deserve to be apprehended more in-depth.

Muneeb can be seen as belonging to an expanding cohort of upper-class and upper-middle-class aspiringly-cosmopolitan South Asian youth, who see pursuing an education abroad as the first step towards the possibility to acquire further degrees of upward social mobility, to be then deployed also at home (see e.g., Baas, 2016; Ullah and Azizuddin, 2018; see also Bartlett et al., 2018, p. 448; Kao and Tienda, 1995). The verticality of Muneeb's aspirations manifests constantly in his narrativizations of what life in Pakistan used to be like for him, starting from the word choices that he makes to talk about his past self: "I was always *on the top*. [...] *I wanted to touch the sky*. I had a lot of ego. I used to go in [a] car with [a] driver and *I was always on the top position*" (interview, 01/25). Geographic movement (e.g., leaving home to complete one's academic formation in a prestigious institution 'abroad') thus becomes the means – one of the means, at least – to start accumulating the necessary social capital to climb up the ladder of social mobility itself: to climb it high enough for him to become able to "touch the sky", even. When looking at Muneeb's case solely from this perspective, then, one could argue that there exist no concrete obligations keeping him stuck in Italy, once that he is done with his degree – especially if staying is causing him such unquantifiable amounts of pain, while also not compensating him, in return, with any sort of benefits. In fact, in an apparently paradoxical turn of events, the act of staying is precisely what is eroding Muneeb's initial social capital – the same capital that was supposed to benefit from the act itself of leaving Pakistan for Europe. And yet, even though this somewhat surgical interpretation is not, per se, a wrong or unreasonable one to advance, it still fails to account for the fact that Muneeb's aspiration to upward mobility through the pursuing of abroad education is one which converges into, and confounds itself with, a constant, almost obsessive strive for another, more literal instantiation of mobility: the possibility to physically move across borders and countries, to travel from one location to another, and to freely spend shorter or longer periods of time living 'abroad'. This is, indeed, a component of upward social mobility in and of itself (see e.g., Urry, 2007)²⁷²; but it is also one whose urgency by far supersedes, for Muneeb, the relevance of the former, as well as one that unmasks the deeply political character of im/mobility itself

²⁷² Importantly enough, just like the possibility to move wherever and whenever one feels like it, being able to choose *not to move* is also part and parcel of that same package of socio-economic privilege.

(Cresswell, 2006; 2010). If for much middle-class European youth transnational travel has by now become an almost routinary act – one as simple as hopping on a train, or last-minute booking a low-cost flight for an impromptu weekend, quite literally, wherever within the EU (see e.g., King, 2002; Koikkalainen, 2019; Recchi, 2015), for a just-as-young, just-as-middle-class Pakistani passport holder like Muneeb, this level of ease in transnational mobility can only be imagined: it can surely be desired, but hardly ever enacted with the same ease. It only follows, then, that movement itself gets ultimately invested with thick, affectively-loaded extra-layers of meaning, to the point of it becoming identitarian – “a matter of personhood or identity” (Carling and Schewel, 2020, ‘Theorising migration aspirations’) – even more than spatial. As Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel put it (ibid.), in such cases, “[m]igrating [...] is not ultimately about where you are, but who you are”. For Muneeb, too, travel freedom becomes an identitarian aspiration rather than solely a means to upward social mobility: the ultimate goal of his migratory project ‘West’ in and of itself. Better yet, it becomes the coveted, yet problematic assemblage where Muneeb’s aspirations to the good life conglomerate, only for them to crash, moments later, against the harsh reality of strict visa policies and pervasive restrictions to transnational movement – especially South-North movement – imposed on non-European, non-white bodies within the EU, and Italy all the more so (see Chapter Three).

When looking at the picture drawn so far from this more composite angle – one steeped, that is, in an understanding of im/mobility as an inextricably political, social, affective, and spatial assemblage (see Cresswell, 2006; 2010) – some obligations keeping Muneeb stuck in Italy do certainly appear to exist, and obligations of the most concrete of kinds, for that matter. As anticipated earlier, I am referring specifically to Muneeb’s ‘weak’ Pakistani passport²⁷³, as well as to his aspiration to circumvent the limitations that his passport imposes upon his freedom of mobility, through the acquiring of new, stronger documents – an outcome that he hopes to achieve, in turn, through the allegedly strategic extension of his stay in Italy. At the time of our conversations²⁷⁴, Muneeb is in fact striving to fulfill all the conditions that will allow him to apply to, and hopefully obtain, a *permesso di soggiorno permanente* (lit. ‘permanent residence permit’), a document granted to individuals who have resided in Italy for at least five consecutive years and who, among a list of other requirements, are able to demonstrate to hold a permanent address, a stable job contract, and a certain amount of yearly income in the country (see Baas, 2016, for a similar analysis with reference to Indian student migration to Australia). If, at first glance, such a striving towards the obtainment of a permanent residence permit to live in Italy might seem like a paradoxical, if not entirely senseless plan when enacted by someone

²⁷³ At the time of writing, Pakistani passport ranks 102nd out of 105 in the Henley Passport Index, and 99th out of 102 in the Passport Index. To check the ranks, see the following links: <https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index/ranking>; <https://www.passportindex.org/> [Accessed: 09/01/2026].

²⁷⁴ The exact period goes from January 2024 to July 2025. We did keep in touch afterwards as well, but here in writing I am referring mostly to interactions happened during that time span.

who declares to *hate* Italy with a passion, the move in and of itself is not. Other than allowing Muneeb the right to reside and work in the country, as well as to access national public health and welfare services, the permit would also – and crucially so – grant him the right to travel freely within the Schengen area, or even move to another EU country to work and live²⁷⁵. This ultimately explains why Muneeb covets the document so much: not because it will allow him to stay in Italy, but, quite the opposite, because it will ideally allow him to *leave* – and, even more crucially so, to *move* and *travel* (see Baas, 2016), in ways that his Pakistani passport would likely never let him. As Michiel Baas (2016, pp. 27-28) analogously argues with reference to young Indians relocating to Australia to further pursue their education, for Muneeb, too, Italy “plays what could be understood as a ‘relative’ role in the equation. Permanent residency facilitates mobility and thus makes it possible to be permanently ‘temporary’ while retaining the rights to give this ‘temporariness’ an indefinite character”. In the Italian context, however, access to this status of permanent temporariness (Baas, 2016) gets enormously complicated by the workings of the local system of migration management – workings which can turn out to be so convoluted that they verge on the absurd –, as well as by the overall precarity characterizing the Italian labor market and overall economy.

Against this backdrop, and all throughout his anguished im/mobile quest to obtain permanent residency in Italy, there are two very material things that Muneeb is most obsessively seeking after: *casa e lavoro* (lit. ‘a house and a job’). It is, in fact, a house and a job that will ideally provide him with the necessary prerequisites to apply for the permit itself, and to subsequently allow him to enjoy the freedom of mobility that he is desiring so intently. It is, however, exactly at this juncture that his stuckness gets further enhanced and paradoxified by the convoluted workings of Italy’s migratory machine, as well by the broader structural precarity that currently affects both the housing and job markets in most of Italy’s main urban centers. In order to be eligible for the permit, Muneeb needs a job – an actual job with a proper contract: his volunteering gig will not do. He also urgently needs a house, as the shelter where he is being temporarily hosted does not provide him with an actual *residenza* (lit. ‘domicile’), which is instead necessary to apply for the permit. The search for both a house and a job are, however, deeply connected, as finding a house for rent without a job contract in a city like Rome is incredibly difficult nowadays, if not straight-up impossible – especially if, as in Muneeb’s case, you are a foreigner with expired documents that do not match your migratory status,

²⁷⁵ More specifically, a EU residence permit entitles the holder to the following: to enter Italy without a visa; travel freely within the Schengen Area for up to ninety days for tourism purposes; engage in employed or self-employed work, except for activities that are expressly reserved by law to Italian citizens or prohibited to foreign nationals; reside in another Schengen member-state, including for periods exceeding ninety days and for employment-related purposes; access social assistance and social security benefits, as well as healthcare, educational and social services; participate in local public life in accordance with the forms and limits established by the law; and rely on services and benefits provided by public authorities (Polizia di Stato, 2024).

and/or are still in the process of being renovated. Like a dog chasing its tail, then, without a regular job, Muneeb is prevented from renting a house; in turn, without a proper job and house contract, he cannot hope to get his documents renovated and his residence permit updated; but without the documents in order, he cannot find a regular job and a regular house contract, either. He is thus stuck in this loop – in this impasse, to borrow from Berlant’s (2011) words; in this “scam”, to borrow directly from Muneeb’s – whereby “it doesn’t make any sense to stay in this country without a house, without a job” (fieldnotes, 04/25), and yet stay he must. And stay he must, not because he is striving to staying as an aspiration per se, but exactly because, by staying, he is cruelly optimistically hoping to reach that one coveted, yet seemingly impossible object (the permit), that, by legally sanctioning his right to stay, will concomitantly also allow him to leave: to travel, to move, in his words, to be/come, allegedly, “free”. Muneeb’s story thus provides a textbook example of how the impasse of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011; see also Coates, 2019) can unravel in migration, and of the ways through which “the anxieties of mobility produce immobility” (Coates, 2019, p. 490), with the structurally-sanctioned rationale behind why Muneeb *cannot leave* (he needs a job to get a house, a house to get his documents, and his documents to get a job) being, cruelly enough, the same rationale behind why he *cannot stay* (he cannot live without a job, and hence without a house, and hence without his documents).

Throughout the development of our research-fueled relationality, having repeatedly found myself in front of the bleak impasse that had come to shape the trajectory of Muneeb’s life after more than four years of struggles in Italy – and having floundered in vain each time in search of solutions, or at least some consolation to offer him –, I eventually end up asking Muneeb what is perhaps the cruelest question one could possibly pose in a situation such as his (interview, 01/25): what is it, then, his plan for the future?

M: I have no plan, because my future plan is not depending on me. My future plan is depending on this country. If someone helps me in getting *a house and a job*, maybe my life can become better [and] I can stay here. But if I do not have any solutions... I don’t know, maybe tomorrow I’ll have to... The last option is my country.

V: And what happens if you go back?

M: What happen if I go back? *People will make my fun*. Nothing more. Because people change their country because their country is not good, and their country is poor, they cannot have good money... They go to another country because they think that their life will be stable, they can have a good house, good job... But like... It’s not... Everyone is not lucky and everyone is not smart. You understand? If you are innocent like me, you will not get anything. If you are a very hard worker, you can sell your ego and self-respect. Maybe you can earn a lot of money by doing Glovo. But that was not my situation. *If I go back, everyone will make my fun*. Nothing will happen. Because I lost my hair. I got a degree which is useless. I’m nowhere. I have no financial stability. *If I go back, I will lose my travel freedom*. Because if I go back, I cannot travel with the Pakistani passport a lot. You understand?

V: Yeah...

M: I have to take visa again and again. And for taking visa, I have to show that I'm rich. If I'm not rich, they will not offer me a visa. That's all. *Everyone will just make my fun I go back.* That's what will happen. That's why I'm not going back.

Put in front of a question that does not leave much room for imagining otherwise, Muneeb eventually cannot help but evoke a possibility that, although unspoken, had been long lingering in silence on the crooked horizon of his futurity: return. Contrary to other participants who, having acquired their right to reside in Italy through refugee status on SOGI grounds, are prevented from re-entering their country – this is, in fact, the very basis upon which their refugeeness rests –, Muneeb can, technically, go back to Pakistan. In fact, throughout the four years that he has spent in Italy, he has managed to visit home more than once, almost invariably in an attempt to restore his physical and mental health when things had gotten too dire for him to handle them alone²⁷⁶. Return as a definitive solution, however, seems to be painfully unattainable to him. Almost as unattainable, in fact, as it is for those who had to make the impossibility of return the moral-cum-legal basis for their right to reside in Italy in and of itself: i.e., the 'refugees' he so much loathes²⁷⁷.

Return is, however, even more ambivalently loaded than these words manage to suggest. On the one hand, the specter of a perspective return to Pakistan is one that confirms the analysis carried out so far: returning home for good, before being able to obtain permanent residency in Italy, would equal a huge loss in travel freedom for Muneeb – a loss that would come to represent the end of his fantasy of the good life, which several years prior had prompted his migration move in the first place ("If I go back, I will lose my travel freedom"). This is not, however, the only drawback that the prospect of a potential return would entail: coming back would also imply accepting the failure of his migration project in and of itself, and all the consequences that this failure would produce: namely, the scorn of other people, and the loss of Muneeb's once-prized respectability that will automatically follow. It would be, in other words, the ultimate uncovering of the lie that Muneeb has been unwillingly forcing himself to live: that he can be happy in Italy; that leaving Pakistan has improved his social status; that he does not need to go back if he wants to feel alive again; and that, even if he does go back, nothing bad will happen. "If I go back, everyone will make my fun. Nothing will happen": Muneeb repeats different iterations of this concept several times in the span of a few minutes when I question him

²⁷⁶ During his permanence in Italy, Muneeb visited numerous other European countries, either for tourism, to join Eu-funded youth-oriented projects, or, when he struggled to find proper accommodation in Italy, to find a temporary place where to live thanks to couch-surfing. He also went to pilgrimage to Mecca several times, and did so whenever he felt he needed a break from his dire life conditions, and clarity to understand how to proceed next.

²⁷⁷ As paradoxical as it may sound, at times it feels even 'more' unattainable. In fact, most of my interlocutors who got legally recognized as refugees on SOGI grounds do strive to return, even if their status prevents them from doing so. Muneeb, on the contrary, is technically able to return, but is prevented to do so by the prospect of the consequences that return would imply for him, on a personal, familial, and societal level.

about the possible outcomes of a prospective return home (see quoted interview, 01/25). And yet, in its insistent recurrence throughout this and other instances of Muneeb's narratives, it is a 'nothing' that reveals to be filled to the brim with the weight of a delusion, which he will be called on to justify not only to himself, but in front of the rest of society as well. Therefore, when Muneeb self-assuredly confronts me with the conviction that my other research interlocutors must have lied to me for sure, it is this scenario that he is implicitly evoking: one where migration becomes a dense assemblage of optimistic attachments whose cruel nature, however, must always be shielded from view if respectability is to remain intact. Happiness has to be performed in front of others – family members, friends, and acquaintances back home, of course, but also the researcher herself, as Muneeb's words clearly hint at –, but it cannot be possibly produced by migration; not even by sexual migration, in fact. Indeed, sexuality becomes but a pretext here, in Muneeb's middle-class, aspiringly cosmopolitan worldview: if sexual/gender defiant people escape the "number one gay country in the world" (field-notes, 07/25), it is in the hope to improve their socio-economic status more than anything else. Otherwise, why would they? Theirs – and thus, Muneeb's – is, however, a hope destined to die soon, crushed under the gears of the machinery of migration bureaucracy, labor and housing precarity, racism, and homophobia, that a country like Italy does not hesitate to bestow upon his 'migrants' – Muneeb included, regardless of his respectable past and present ambitious aspirations²⁷⁸. It only follows, then, that anyone who states otherwise – anyone who declares to an Italian researcher to be happy after migrating to Italy, for instance – must necessarily be lying.

Hence, in light of the broader context in which it is located, and as already argued also for Shanto (see section 4.3.2.), Muneeb's motion of attachment to mobility-through-stuckness cannot be dismissed as a mere instance of a self-destructive obsession or pathology (see Berlant, 2011, p.14)²⁷⁹, personally affecting him, and him alone. It does not matter how much this interpretation may seem like the only one capable of accounting for the apparently senseless obstinacy in Muneeb's trajectory of im/mobility, it is nonetheless insufficient. First of all, such a move would imply erasing the very condition necessary for optimistic attachment to develop in the first place. If anything, in fact, this problematic relation also constitutes, for Muneeb, a function of his very own livability, a tool of sustenance through which he manages to keep himself in the world, no matter how incoherently, painfully, and cruelly. As Lauren Berlant (p. 27, emphasis added) personally emphasizes, "[cruel

²⁷⁸ He, too, in other words, has ultimately become one of the 'refugees' – an actualization of the worst possible outcome for his migratory project.

²⁷⁹ Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 14) explains this idea as follows: "In this book optimism is not a map of pathology but a social relation involving attachments that organize the present. It is an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of world-making, which may be hooked on futures, or not. [...] I am looking at the complexity of being bound to life. Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently".

optimism] is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call “the good life,” which is for so many *a bad life* that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it”. Secondly, a focus on affect should not entail excluding from the purview of the analysis a wider attention to the social, economic, and political realms, that inform the workings of attachment in the first place – in this case, by both allowing and inhibiting Muneeb’s mobility at the same time. In fact, Berlant’s (2011) original theorizations of affect, too, come out of a broader diagnosis of the structural maladies affecting, specifically for *Cruel Optimism* (2011), contemporary capitalism and its many tentacular offsprings. If anything, then, cruel optimism can only make sense and be understood through and against the workings of contemporary capitalist structures themselves: cruel optimism, in other words, exists because of capitalism, and vice-versa, capitalism needs cruel optimism to exist. Similarly, here, the paradox of Muneeb’s mobility-in-stuckness – of mobility through stuckness, of stuckness as a function of mobility – cannot be reduced to an individual and affective realm alone. As the discussion has attempted to illuminate, it is rather fueled – constructed as a paradox in the first place, even – by the inherently flawed, unbalanced, and often violent workings of Italian migration bureaucracy first, and of the broader system of global inequalities of visas, passport strength, and freedom of im/mobility that surround it, second. The reasons why Muneeb *cannot remain* in Italy and, at the same time, *neither can he leave* are thus equally institutional and intimate, political and personal, societal and individual. The in-between space separating, yet at the same time also conjoining, the two impossibly coexisting scenarios of staying and leaving is exactly where Muneeb can keep on being alive – albeit, perhaps, without really living.

4.4.3. Coda. Thinking and Rethinking Returns

Muneeb is so fully immersed in his desperate attachment to im/mobility that he truly seems to be left with no option at all other than the limbo that he has been consigned to, and that he refuses to let go of. The portrait sketched in the previous pages has attempted to reproduce, in writing, exactly this sense of hopelessness that appears to so insistently characterize Muneeb’s life in Italy, and that has so often come to haunt the research-fueled conversational space opening up between the two of us. And yet, this does not imply that in the thick veil of cruelty that cloaks Muneeb’s existence in migration there can be no openings at all. In fact, albeit somewhat intrinsic to contemporary iterations of attachment and desire tout court (Berlant, 2011), the ‘cruel’ bit in ‘cruel optimism’ can, at the same time, take up different nuances – differences in both gradient and distribution, that is to say – depending on the contexts where, and the conditions across which, it develops (Parla, 2017; 2019). It can be/come, in other words, more or less cruel. Starting off from this awareness, and without discrediting

the overwhelming cruelty that does indeed invest Muneeb in his strenuous attempts to get what he wants – travel rights, a cosmopolitan life, freedom – while trying not to lose, at the same time, what he already has – respectability, social capital, and economic wealth –, it becomes necessary to pause here, in order to stress the fact that Muneeb does indeed have some ‘things’ already, and very concrete, very valuable ‘things’, for that matter: a house where to come back to, for instance, and a family that can support him if he does. Borrowing from the critique that Ayşe Parla (2017; 2019; see also section 4.3.2.) moves to Berlant’s (2011) original formulation of cruel optimism, then, it can be argued that the gradience and distribution of Muneeb’s hope and optimism are of the kind that leaves out some space, however narrow, for something that cruel *is not*: something kind, in fact. Not too dissimilarly from what happens also with Shanto (see Section 4.3.4.), in Muneeb’s narratives, too, instances of kindness tentatively peek out from cruelty – when least expected, in all likelihood only temporarily, but significantly nonetheless – and they do so, crucially enough, through the previously-sketched ambivalent spatial and conceptual realm of return. To provide a glimpse of how this happens, and in a move to finally conclude this chapter, here I will limit myself to only sketch two very brief ethnographic vignettes, centering around Muneeb and two of his returns: a definitive one, only dreaded but not (yet?) enacted; and a (perhaps) temporary one, but actually put into place. I believe that the vignettes’ ultimate inability to provide satisfying closure – to this thesis, to Muneeb’s iterations of cruel optimism, as well as to mine, as the ethnographer of Muneeb’s life – can convey the actual texture of Muneeb’s cruelly im/mobile aspirations, perhaps more accurately than any other juncture of this text has been able to do so far: that is to say, via their fractured, temporary, ever-shifting, and unpredictable character.

Return #1

It has been only three months since I posited Muneeb the perhaps most brutal question possible about his future plans of stuckness and/or return, when, during another meeting with him, the flow of the conversation somehow brings me to ask him a different iteration of the same question again: “And if you go back [to Pakistan]? Will you be able to work, have a place [where to stay] and all?”, I ask him (fieldnotes, 04/25). The answer that I receive this time, however, differs significantly from the previous one: he has a house there, he says; he has everything that he needs, in fact, and he will not have to worry about anything if he goes back. “Even if I do nothing, I can live a very good life [in Pakistan]” he explains to me “I just wanted to keep these documents to travel, *but when I will not be able to be alive what I will do with these?*” (fieldnotes, 04/25).

This newfound level of awareness and acceptance in Muneeb points, first and foremost, to the centrality of the realm of materiality for the unfolding of his life: the non-yet-pathology of cruel

optimism can be escaped – can be attempted to be escaped, or even simply redirected onto something else – because it can be cushioned by already-existing material conditions of ‘the good life’; if not, of the good-*ish* life, at least (see Parla, 2017). Muneeb admits to be ready to renounce to his yearning for betterness – for the freedom of movement that his Pakistani version of the good life cannot contemplate, and for the Italian document that he will (not) manage to obtain – not so much to forego goodness tout court, but, rather, to attempt to resort back to all the other conditions of goodness that he used to enjoy in the past, and that do, nonetheless, await him at home – that he is optimistically hoping will be awaiting him. In other words, one could argue, Muneeb is accepting to resort back to a condition of *everything but* mobility, this time to be understood even more literally than khanna’s (2016) original interpretive move on sexuality intended to: that is to say, to a condition where Muneeb has everything that he needs/wants, with the exception of freedom of (transnational) mobility. As already discussed earlier on in this section, contrary to those who choose/have to stay in Europe as recognized refugees and are thus legally prohibited from reentering their home country unless they want to see their status revoked, Muneeb can physically and legally embark on a journey back, even if doing so does imply running the risk of not being able to get out again – even if this implies, in other words, being returned to the condition of stuckness/stillness that fueled his attachment to mobility in the first place. But also that, at a later time in Italy, paradoxically started to constitute the sine qua non, without which his search for further, freer mobility couldn’t possibly happen: the stuckness that he got stuck into, in his tending towards movement. In a way, it could be argued, Muneeb’s, too, is a form of ‘refugeeness’, but reversed: if the refugee leaves Pakistan to (ideally) never be able to come back, Muneeb contemplates the idea to go back to Pakistan to (unwillingly) never be able to leave again. He becomes, in a way, a refugee of the world²⁸⁰.

No doubt, the point that Muneeb used to make about return, at the peak of his cruelly optimistic mobility-obsession, still stands: he will indeed come back a loser – and in the most literal sense of the word possible: he has lost his health, his hair, his money, his ego. His glossing over this point now, only a few months after his previously expressed return-related anxieties, constitutes perhaps nothing other than yet another manifestation of that same cruel optimism which, albeit redirected, invariably fuels his attachment to all those life-decisions that he has no other option but to make. And yet, this time, at least he will be *alive*. Muneeb is ready to let go of the fantasy of freedom and cosmopolitanism that the impossibly-attainable documents will open up to him – perhaps never –, if this

²⁸⁰ But also, in a way, it cannot even be argued that this logic is purely inverted. Refugee status itself must be rather understood (also) as a tool of migration management that regulates and restricts possibilities of movement, rather than as a purely protective measure that facilitates migration journeys. In this sense, we ultimately find ourselves confronting always the same fundamental issue: the unbalanced relationship between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ travel documents, and, more broadly, an unequal global framework where the mobility of some – its easiness, rapidity, frequency, safety, etc. – happens at the cost of and/or against the immobility of others.

means continuing to live. In the midst of it all – the racism, the queerphobia, the unjust regimes of im/mobility, the depression, the economic downfall, and the overall suffering and precarity, which have come to shape Muneeb’s life in Italy – this sounds like a decently healthy iteration of optimism to me. A kinder one, for sure.

Return #2

October 2025. I am frantically trying to finish writing this thesis and I haven’t been able to talk to Muneeb much, with the exception of the few sparse messages that we exchange to comment the Instagram reels that he periodically sends me. It is exactly during one of such routinary, brief, and, to be honest, rather distracted conversations, that he communicates to me that he is back home in Pakistan. My immediate thought when I read the message is: back home for good. After all, this move would perfectly fit the narrative of kindness-in-cruelty that I am concomitantly trying to conceptualize about him, while writing the section of my thesis devoted to his life and migration experiences. Needless to say, I am wrong. When I ask him if he is planning to stay there or come back to Italy at some point, he replies that in December he has to apply for his Italian permanent residency, and he is thus trying to find a place where to stay in a small Italian town. He is, in other words, back in the im/mobility loop – perhaps, in fact, he had never gotten out of the loop in the first place. The carousel of cruel optimism thus continues, surely interspersed by meaningful bouts of kindness, but always escaping resolution, both in Muneeb’s ever-unfolding life, as well as in the limited written rendition that the present thesis is forced to fix his life into.

CONCLUSIONS

*Pūrā hoke khatam huā sab
Jo hai ādhā voh hī zindā hai*²⁸¹

How does one write a single, comprehensive, and satisfactory conclusion to multiple and multifaceted life-stories (see Eastmond, 1996) such as those that lie at the heart of the present work – fractured, unique, independent, and different from one another, and even more crucially so, not yet finished but still unfolding, each in its own unpredictable direction, hopefully for many more years to come? Strictly speaking, one does not. A dilemma intrinsic to the ethnographic endeavor tout court, research and writing must necessarily stop at a point of fictive, academically-sanctioned closure, while the lives of their own protagonists are – hopefully, at least – still in flux: changing, developing, taking turns against the grain of ethnography itself, which ethnography cannot but give up on hoping to account for. This is all the more true for a research endeavor such as this, which, already from its outset, had consciously forsaken any claim to representativity of, and generalization about, the ‘South Asian queerness in Italy’ assemblage, to embrace, instead, a more ethically- and politically-attuned approach to migration as a nuanced phenomenon, to be best apprehended via a subjectivity-centered research lens (Mezzadra, 2001; 2004; see also Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, pp. 83-85; Fontanari, 2019; Garella and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2013b; Pinelli, 2017, pp. 11-15). As already amply argued elsewhere (see Chapter One, Section 1.2.), there is a strong political vocation inherent in articulating migration research through a lens that refuses the imperatives of policy- and state-centric agendas, and stays attuned, instead, to migrants’ subjectivities the most (Bakewell, 2008; Casa-Cortes et al., 2015, pp. 83-85; Fontanari, 2019; Garella and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2013b; Glick-Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Mezzadra, 2001; Pinelli, 2017, pp. 11-15;; Schinkel, 2018). This does not at all mean ignoring the ‘structures’ that lie behind migration, including, but not limited to, highly-regulated global frameworks of im/mobility via scales of passports’ ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’; regimes of classed, racialized, and gendered im/mobilization, border control, and illegalization; state-sanctioned policies for migration management; as well as the overall systemic violence of borders in and of themselves. Quite the contrary, it rather requires detecting how structures unfold through, and in, individuals, as well as how individuals jostle and come into being through and against such structures: how people are turned, *or not*, into viable subjects of reception, protection, asylum, integration, and citizenship, or,

²⁸¹ This is a line from the song ‘Bulleya’, from Hindi-language film *Sultan* (dir. Ali Abbas Zafar, 2016). It roughly translates as: ‘Everything ends the moment it becomes complete; only what remains unfinished is alive’. I have to thank Riya, my wonderful Hindi and Urdu teacher, for introducing me to the song during one of our classes in Delhi, thus unknowingly planting a first seed that later grew into the overall orientation of this concluding section of the thesis.

alternatively, of deportation, repatriation, detention, and containment (Casa-Cortes et al., 2015); but also – as the specific focus of this research shows – of ‘queerness’, of lgbt-ness, and of gender/sexuality tout court. What is thus at stake in downsizing the scale of investigation to the realm of subjectivity is not a retreat from the political and into fictive, misleading conceptions of ‘agency’, ‘independence’, or ‘hyper-individuality’; but rather, a different way of inhabiting the political itself: one that foregrounds lived experience more than policy relevance, and that, in doing so, attempts to restore enhanced attentiveness to migrants’ full, unfiltered humanness – something that they are often stripped off of, not only by policy, but by academic research just as much (see e.g., Bakewell, 2008; see also Chapter Three, Section 3.2.).

It is also in a move to stay as true as possible to this approach, then, that at the end of this work I find myself jostling with a certain ontological resistance towards concluding: towards charting out the final, transversal findings emerging out of four incredibly diverse experiences of im/mobility from the South Asian region to Italy – Sam, Atif, Shanto, and Muneeb’s –, that breathed life into the pages of this work exactly by way of their uniqueness, and whose uniqueness I strive to preserve. At the same time, however, I feel equally compelled, by an imperative both ethical and thematical in nature, to account for the extent to which these same four life-stories also prove infinitely valuable in surfacing crucial dynamics of migration, sexual migration, as well as *everything but* sexual migration, which would have remained hidden, had it not been for the macro/micro-scale, subjectivity-centered approach to im/mobility adopted throughout this work to apprehend them in the first place. And thus, some sort of conclusions write I must, and I will, driven as I am to do so less by the expectations of academic writing ‘proper’, than by the firm belief that both the impossibility of ontological closure, and the necessity to chart out valuable and meaningful conclusions do, in fact, coexist, no matter how paradoxical this stance may sound. Driven as I am, in other words, by the belief that, when it comes to closure, the seamlessness, rather than opposition, between the realm of the possible and that of the impossible constitutes less a paradox, than the very ethical ground where the present work unfolds the most meaningfully.

While it is undeniable that Sam, Atif, Shanto, and Muneeb’s life-stories²⁸² yield each a different outlook on sexual and/or *everything but* sexual migration from South Asia to Italy – every single one of them thus potentially calling for a different set of conclusions –, I nonetheless believe that this research does carry a certain amount of ‘generalizable’ significance: perhaps, one residing more in the overall methodological and ethical posture of the work, than in its contents and findings per se – even though the latter, too, are obviously endowed with their own profound value, which exists

²⁸² And, on top of them, potentially also the life-stories of all the other people that I have met throughout the conduction of this research but ended up not writing about in this thesis, as well as of those I did not get the chance to intercept but that for sure exist out there in the world.

regardless of the one attributable to them by any research endeavor of sorts. I am referring, specifically, to the already-mentioned subjectivity-centered approach to the study of migration that this project takes; but also, and very much relatedly, to the area-sensitive stance it embraces – without, however, becoming area-abiding, culturalist, or essentialist –, as well as to the queerly-attuned epistemology it espouses – without, however, becoming blindly faithful to some ideological rigidities of queer theory itself. The consciously, critically-implemented combination of these three heuristic and theoretical stances together – coterminously subjectivity-centered, area-sensitive, and queerly-attuned – constitutes the main source of innovation both within this project in and of itself, as well as against the broader backdrop of Italy-based migration scholarship, where a dialogue between these three different epistemological strands is yet to gain traction (see Introduction). It has been, again, exactly this three-fold epistemology to allow for the emergence of the most critical sets of research findings in and of themselves. In light of this, I want to devote the remaining portion of this concluding chapter to briefly retrace the main points that have emerged from this research, precisely via the adoption of the three-fold composite lens delineated above. While referring, no doubt, to the peculiar specificities of the research context that I have traversed, such findings also very much exceed the latter, proving able to speak well beyond the contingencies of this research project in and of itself.

The first, most crucial conclusion that I want to chart out as stemming from the adoption of the abovementioned combinedly subjectivity-, area-, and queerly-inflected lens concerns the extent to which the category of ‘migration’ itself ends up falling short in accounting for the richness and material complexities of migrants’ lives – including so-called ‘sexual migrants’ – no matter how paradoxical this stance may sound. In fact, the moment such a subjectivity-centered, area-sensitive, queerly-inflected lens is deployed to look at the life-stories of people relocating from South Asia to Italy for reasons related, at least in part, to their sexual/gender defiance, ‘migration’ cannot but lose its analytical primacy and part of its interpretative grip, and simply enough because it proves a non-sufficient, albeit no doubt necessary, realm to make sense of the nuances that people’s actual lives take on, and which very much exceed ‘migration’ in and of itself. In its place, the broader sphere of im/mobility, as apprehended across critical mobility studies (see Della Puppa and Sanò, 2020; 2021; degli Uberti 2019; 2021; Nimführ and Sesay 2019; Salazar, 2019; Schapendonk and Steel 2014), proves much apter to assess what happens throughout people’s journeys of sexual migration and/or *everything but* sexual migration to Italy: more precisely, the moves and movements people embark on, and the forms of stuckness they get engulfed into. And, crucially enough, not only in the geographical sense of movement equals migration equals the crossing of distant nation-state borders; but also in the corporeal sense of the bodily gestures that people make or do not make, and through which their ‘queerness’ manifests and acquires different sets of meanings in different locations, alternatively

getting embraced or refused, accepted or sanctioned; in the quotidian sense of moving from one location to another, also *after* the main migration journey is deemed ‘completed’; as well as, additionally, in the discursive sense of moving in, beyond, or against both migratory and sexual/gender categories, and, consequently, in, beyond, or against the spaces – as well as the forms of support, the genealogies, the aesthetic codes, the sets of sociality – that each of these categories differently grants access to. Apprehended in all the ambivalence that it takes on throughout participants’ variegated experiences of relocation from South Asia to Italy, and declined across the three different scales of magnitude hinted at above – from bodily gestures (Chapter Two), to everyday discursive and spatial movements post-migration (Chapter Three), to transnational migration itself (Chapter Four) –, im/mobility thus acts as the *fil rouge* of this thesis: as the actual backbone of this work, and as the lens through which participants’ lives and experiences, *in* and *beyond* migration, get to be apprehended, without, however, being flattened to the realm of migration ‘proper’ alone. Importantly enough, this move is one through which the present work strives to join the increasing number of voices that, in the last few years, have been calling for the so-called “de-migranticization” of migration research (Dahinden, 2016): that is to say, for a shift away from treating ‘the migrant’ as a self-evident analytical unit, and ‘migration’ as the primary, if not exclusive, frame through which ‘migrant’ lives are rendered intelligible, and to rather read migration itself as, and through, other dimensions of the social²⁸³. In fact, that of de-migranticization is a project aiming less to abandon migration as an object of inquiry tout court, than to displace it, decenter its explanatory primacy, and re-situate it within a broader constellation of social processes, relations, and meanings that both sustain and exceed it (Dahinden, 2016; see also Dahinden, Fischer and Menet, 2021; Raghuram, Breines and Gunter, 2024). In line with the arguments espoused by Janine Dahinden (2016, p. 2215), I thus suggest that the im/mobility turn taken by this thesis constitutes one possible move in the direction of de-migranticization: one that still keeps migration at the center of analysis, thus allowing for the assessment of the peculiar scenarios and challenges that certain strands of migration to Italy yield; but also one that does so without exhausting, in the migration rationale alone, all that can be said about people’s lives: about their movements and non-movements more specifically, be they spatial, temporal, or discursive in nature. In other words, one that does not essentialize migration, and the people partaking in it, within rigid systems of categorization, which in turn leave virtually no space for people’s full-fledged humanness to emerge, beyond the state-sanctioned, policy-led expectations that migration management envisions for them. Instead, through this approach, people’s ambivalent desires, idiosyncrasies, regrets, dreams, and delusions – which migration can fuel as much as hinder,

²⁸³ I want to thank Gianluca Gatta, as external reader of this thesis, for suggesting that I integrate in the work the concept of de-migranticization.

sometimes coterminously – resurface as dimensions that can, and should, be apprehended beyond the managerial logic of the nation-state: as part and parcel of a migration experience that, however, cannot be exhausted solely within the migratory trajectory, and, even more so, within the state-sanctioned linear logics that the latter so often yields: of mobility as transnational migration from nation-state A to nation-state B; of transnational migration as a journey of escape and salvation; of transnational sexual migration, more specifically, as a passage from queerphobia and self-repression, to coming out and self-realization. Against the backdrop of this epistemological posture, it only follows that migration categories shed their guise as neutral descriptors of an empirical reality of transnational movement and non-movement, and rather get unmasked as powerful instruments of state-sanctioned migration management, which actively participate in producing the subjects they claim to simply be describing – and that do so, more often than not, by limiting subjects’ possibilities for existing, moving, acting, and desiring as full-fledged human beings, before than as ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘*clandestini*’, or more.

Similarly, and very much relatedly, lgbt+ identity categories, too, turn out to be complicit in the broader machine of migration management evoked above, rather than simple and unproblematic globally-circulating, universally-intelligible descriptors of people’s modalities to express their gendered and/or sexual selves. They get unmasked, in other words, as managerial tools in the hands of the state, which participate in establishing who can move and where and how fast, and who cannot; who can be deemed credibly and properly ‘queer’ and, on this ground, receive support and reception measures, and who is only ‘faking’ it for the documents; in blunter terms, who can stay and who shall be deported. These limitations intrinsic in the ‘lgbt+’ categorization system and its deployment within migration regimes become even more evident when read against a lens purposefully attuned to South Asian gendered and sexual formations. The latter, in fact, do not necessarily and perfectly match with the ontology-based system of gender and sexuality that lies at the basis of globalized lgbt+ epistemologies and identities in and of themselves – an element, this latter one, that complicates further an already elaborate set of power dynamics, whereby proving to be ‘the right kind of queer’ is detrimental to the unfolding of possibilities of livability, or lack thereof, for people in migration. So-called sexual migrants – in the specific case of this research reaching Italy from the South Asian region, but this discourse might as well be adapted to other contexts of migration – can, in fact, bear witness to, and embody, modalities of experiencing the sexual that do not neatly translate into ‘gay’ and/or ‘transgender’, for instance, or into any other of the possibilities offered by the open-ended lgbt+ acronym itself. As several stories collected in this ethnography begin to testify to, when the lgbt+ model of identity is made to be the basis for migrants’ recognition and access to support and reception – but also for their entrance into alternative spaces of sociality and leisure –, this is bound to yield huge

effects of people's lives, with consequences on the realms of reception and documents, of personal and collective identification and disidentification, but also on the apparently more mundane spheres of leisure, aesthetics, friendships, relationships, and artistic self-expression. Importantly enough, this is yet another plane via which migration – 'queer/sexual migration' (see Carrillo, 2017; Mole, 2021) more specifically – as an analytical category gets dismembered and set aside, this time to be apprehended as *everything but* sexual migration, with an area-attuned epistemological move that redirects and integrates akshay khanna's (2016) analogous intervention in the broader field of the sexual and sexuality in South Asian. As I have thoroughly explored in earlier sections of this thesis, it is, once again, only thanks to the composite perspective adopted all throughout this research – one in which 'area', I argue, plays the detrimental role – that sexual migration from the South Asian region to Italy gets to show itself in all of its *everything but* quality: not in the sense that the sexual does not play a role in migration, but, rather, to the extent to which the sexual itself becomes entangled in broader apparatuses of governance, recognition, and control, first of all, but also, simply enough, of class, respectability, sociality, religion, or aesthetics, that under the banner of 'sexuality' itself get disappeared.

Importantly enough, the immediate takeaway of this newfound epistemological positioning shall not necessarily be the dismissal of these categories tout court – be they migratory, or sexual/gender categories –, but, rather, a critical awareness of their partiality and of the work they perform, both within migration regimes and throughout academic knowledge production. A work, I argue, that the co-presence of a theoretical posture triply attuned to subjectivity, area, and queer can make evident in particularly effective manners. The workings of such posture – whose exploration has constituted the heart itself of this work – can be roughly summarized as follows: first of all, area communicates with queer stances, both limiting their reach, and redirecting them towards more appropriate – because area-attuned – avenues; such an area-sensitive evocation of 'queer', in turn, informs and gives shape to a broader attunement to migrants' subjectivity, highlighting the extent to which the structural and the subjective inform each other all time throughout regimes of transnational migration; thanks to its capacity to apprehend the entanglement between subjective and structural dynamics, it also contributes to make apparent the *everything but* quality of both sexuality and sexual migration in and of themselves; this subjectivity-centered, yet structures-attuned stance, again, works to decenter the primacy of migration 'proper', to rather fuel the preeminence of an im/mobility lens, instead; finally, such a privileging of im/mobility does the ultimate work of tying everything back together: people's irreducible subjectivity, migration structures, and their intricate entanglements; but also, queerness and *everything but* queerness, as well as area. In other words, what I have attempted to surface the most throughout this research – via an ethnographic engagement with the contingencies of four life-

stories of im/mobility between South Asia and Italy, but with a posture ideally replicable in many other migration milieus, as well – is the following: the fact that the copresence of all three perspectives – subjective, area, and queer – functions exactly to the extent to which they both *inform* each other, and *mine* each the primacy of the other at the same time, all the time. It was, indeed, only through such a constant dialogue/clash of theories, epistemologies, and sensibilities, that Sam, Atif, Shanto, and Muneeb's life-stories could emerge throughout the present ethnography in all of their thickness, uniqueness, and productive ambivalence.

When looked at from this composite perspective, then, sexual/queer migrations from South Asia to Italy can no longer be simplistically reduced to linear passages from repression to freedom, as the SOGI asylum rationale would warrant; nor can they be adequately captured through an obsolete vocabulary of push and pull factors, as classic apprehensions of South-North transnational migrations would have called for. If anything, far more central to my interlocutors' narratives prove to be, instead, way messier, but also way more humane, questions of desire – of wanting what you can/not have and not getting it, of wanting again, and of wanting more –, which drive, at times hinder, their migration projects 'West'. Crucially, desires that migration may, in turn, nurture further, or, more frequently than not, stifle and interrupt. It is thus exactly from this significantly adjusted posture that participants' life stories stop appearing as straightforward instances of 'queer' migration, and rather assume the form of constellations of ambivalent im/mobilities – the same ambivalent im/mobilities that confer this thesis its very title: movements and non-movements of and between bodies, discourses, aspirations, and legal statuses; advances and retreats across cities, streets, reception facilities, as much as across nation-state borders; attachments that vanish, attachments that remain, and attachments that haunt. Moreover, constellations where desires, emotions, and sexuality – as well as everything else that sexuality is *not*, but that under the sexuality banner coalesces and hides (khanna, 2016) – enter the picture significantly, even if often more obliquely than one might expect. Indeed, one cannot make full sense of Atif and Sam's journeys from Pakistan, to Libya, to Lampedusa, to mainland Italy, as well as of their aftermaths, without coterminously assessing other instances of movement and mooring that they both get engaged by, in, during and after migration 'proper': without considering, for instance, how their body-language becomes the pivot through which they signify and re-signify their 'queerness'; without trying to grasp what lies beyond the choice to leave behind one's designated place in the reception system, even when this move appears as nothing short of counterproductive, if not outright illogical; or, again, without taking into consideration the deep sets of meaning conglomerating inside an action as simple as choosing a specific and specifically-positioned place where to eat, or walk and talk. Similarly, one cannot assess Shanto and Muneeb's profound sense of disappointment with their newfound condition, respectively, as a 'gay' refugee and *everything but a*

refugee, without coterminously recovering the threads tying together what their quotidian past lives in South Asia used to look like, what dreams and surpluses of meanings they had invested Europe-bound migration with, and how the workings of European migration management contribute to shatter those same dreams, instead. Summing up, what this thesis ultimately suggests is that it is not possible to understand migration – be it sexual, straight, or anything else ‘in between’ – without first exploding migration itself from the inside. It thus only follows that migration becomes but *one* of several multifaceted dimensions of im/mobility, across which participants’ sexually/gender defiant lives get and are made to unfold: an extremely impactful one, for sure, but never isolated, autonomous, or independent from other aspects of the social (see Dahinden, 2016). In fact, a dimension impossible to disentangle from other orders of movement and non-movement – some strictly spatial, others more discursive and affective in nature, others, still, a combination of both –, that traverse and shape migration at every turn, both informing it and exceeding it at the same time, all the time.

In light of this whole discussion, I thus want to further stress that the composite approach to research being retraced here in these pages is one that can attempt a meaningful step forward when it comes to doing justice to the complexity of people’s lives in migration, and im/mobility more broadly. In this sense, then, it is one that can be translated – generalized, in a way – to many other contexts and trajectories of transnational migration, too. It can become, consequently, one possible antidote against the vicious, double-edged process of discursive flattening of migrant subjectivities, the diagnosis of which operated as the starting point for the development of this research endeavor in its entirety: that is to say, the discursive flattening of ‘the migrant’ as invariably male and a-sexual, yet coterminously heterosexual, deprived of desires, and only focusing on his and his family’s economic betterment, on the one hand; and of the ‘queer migrant’ – the SOGI refugee, all the more so – as necessarily lacking a past, a language, a set of politics, a history, as well as a pre-existing, if constantly-adjusting, baggage of vocabularies and embodiments of sexual/gender defiance, on the other (see Introduction). The laying down of the concrete effects of this approach on a specific constellation of fields – rather than the restoring of a comprehensive image of South Asian queerness in Italy, in itself an ambitious and likely untenable endeavor – constituted the main preoccupation of the present work. It was, in fact, through the deployment of the three-fold subjectivity-centered, area-sensitive, and queerly-inflected lens reevoked throughout these pages, that the life-stories of four people have ultimately become the ‘material’ around which an entire ethnography has developed: the im/mobile lives of Atif, Sam, Shanto, and Muneeb – more precisely, a few significant glimpses into their lives –, that nonetheless can easily be made to speak to issues extending well beyond their own uniqueness. Be it tied to something as small as an ‘effeminate’ pinky finger, or as wide as a potentially deathly, months-long journey across countries and borders, I hope that the nuanced thickness that emerged

from these four life-stories has already bear witness to what this approach can give to migration research.

Now that the overall posture and the main theoretical and epistemological stances emerging from the present thesis have been retraced, the academic imperative to conclude comes back knocking at the backdoor of this work. While it does so, it once again brings the discussion in front of the ontological conundrum that opened up this final section in the first place, but that has also silently been traversing this entire work from its very outset: that of having to put a full stop to something that, at most, might only be suspended by the brief pause of a comma; something that keeps unfolding, and changing, and developing, while its written rendition does not. In a way, this is a conundrum inherent to the ethnographic endeavor in and of itself, and all the more so to an im/mobile (e.g., Knowles, 2000; Novoa, 2015), patchwork-like (Günel, and Watanabe 2023) ethnography conducted against already ‘fractured’ and im/mobile contexts, such as those comprised by contemporary routes of sexual/queer/*everything but* queer migration from South Asia to Italy. And indeed, finalizing the conclusions to this chapter and thesis as a whole is an act that does, no doubt, indulge in ethnography’s fascination for temporalizing its own subjects, by way of projecting them into a past that only writing can manage and define, while people’s actual lives continue to unfold in a present, and toward futures, that inevitably elude the fixity of text (see Fabian, 2014; see also Della Puppa and Sanò, 2021, p. 511). The academically-sanctioned text yields, in fact, an expectation for answers, which is integral to the act itself of writing, and to the amount of fixity and resolution that academic writing tends to, and has to call for. It is also something that I cannot escape: this temporalizing operation has, in fact, already been conducted, all throughout the ethnographic sections of this thesis. Naming this paradox, however – making it explicit in text, instead of silently giving up to the imperative of resolution – does represent a possibility, if a feeble one, to materialize a refusal of the totalizing myth of explanatory conclusions and of an ‘end’. It can become, in other words, a way of keeping the unresolvedness of contemporaneity and presentness – of life as it unfolds – in view, even if it cannot be fully inscribed in text and narrative. Writing fixes, even when what it fixes is alive and resistant to codification (see Sermijn, Devlieger and Loots, 2008). And yet, that the fact that people’s lives continue to unfold, in and after migration, cannot be left unaddressed, especially if one pauses to sit with the awareness that those who are being written about here are but a sparse minority, among those who contemplate and attempt the migration journey towards fortress Europe: some of the ‘lucky’ ones who manage to survive and stay alive in the first place – which, in the current European and Italian socio-political climate towards inward flows of migration, is not something to be taken lightly²⁸⁴. When the lives of

²⁸⁴ The ongoing occurrence of shipwrecks and migrants’ deaths in the Mediterranean, together with persistently high rates of suicide and self-harm within Italy’s CPR (*Centri di Permanenza per il Rimpatrio*), both point to how structurally exposed to death certain routes of transnational migration continue to be. Against this context, I thus want to suggest, the

those who are being written about get to keep unfolding, more or less predictably, faster than the writing hands on the keyboard do, aspirations to representativeness and resolution should thus perhaps better be paused, and the unpredictability of aliveness savored. At the cost of depriving the very last bit of this work of the satisfaction of full-fledged, academically-sanctioned conclusions, then, here I want to try and remain attuned to the aliveness of participants' life-stories of sexual migration till the very end, through conclusions that, on a more strictly ontological level, do not fervently strive for resolution. I do so by invoking that same lens that has been guiding this work from the very beginning: a lens that is mobile and yet can sit with stuckness; a lens that is area-sensitive and yet can leave 'area' behind; a lens that is queer and yet can move beyond queerness. It was, indeed, against this composite backdrop that a raised pinky finger, six mysterious smartphone photos, or a reiterated order of fried chicken and fries, among other things/scenes, got to become doors through which structural dynamics of queerness and/in migration came into view and got to be apprehended: beyond the totalizing imperatives of policies and nation-state frameworks, and through the foregrounding of small-scale, fleeting, lived experiences – fleeting because lived, in fact –, and the meanings that attach to them. A lack of expectation that research must produce self-conclusive, generalizable, policy-viable outcomes was exactly what allowed such attunement to happen.

Strictly speaking, then, yes: this thesis satisfies the expectations for a proper, full-fledged set of conclusions only in part. If, on the one hand, I firmly believe that the critical, methodological, and overall 'postural' apparatus of this work deserves its place in the Olympus of conclusions, I nonetheless also want to keep the ontological plane of research open. As simple as it sounds, I want to do so because to bottle up, in the mold of definitive 'research findings', plural, composite lives that keep unfolding as I write, and will not stop unfolding once the writing is done, would mean mistaking suspension for closure, writing for life. If anything, then, what I hope this concluding section has to offer is not only an academically-viable ending to this research; but also, a path into staying with incompleteness as a methodological, ethical, and political stance. As the lines of the film/i song that I chose to open this final section with recite: everything dies the moment it becomes complete / only the unfinished is alive. And thus may this thesis, and the questions it attempts to open, remain so: alive and incomplete, alive because incomplete.

aliveness of those who survive should not constitute something to be taken for granted, but rather foregrounded as a critical site of inquiry in its own right.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abenante, D. (2017) The Pakistani Community in Italy: Religion, Kinship and Authority. In: S. Baldin and M. Zago (eds.) *Europe of Migrations: Policies, Legal Issues and Experiences*. Trieste: EUT Edizioni, pp. 329-334.
- Ahmad, A. N. (2008) The Romantic Appeal of Illegal Migration: Gender, Masculinity and Human Smuggling from Pakistan. In: M. Schrover et al. (eds.) *Illegal Migration and Gender in a Global and Historical Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 127-150.
- Ahmad, A. N. (2009) Bodies That (Don't) Matter: Desire, Eroticism and Melancholia in Pakistani Labour Migration. *Mobilities*, 4 (3), pp. 309-327.
- Ahmad, A. N. (2011) *Masculinity, Sexuality and Illegal Migration: Human Smuggling from Pakistan to Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Ahmed, I. (2019) Decolonising Queer Bangladesh: Neoliberalism Against LGBTQ+ Emancipation. In: C. Cottet and M. Lavinias Picq (eds.) *Sexuality and Translation in World Politics*. Bristol: E-International Relations, pp. 101-111.
- AIDA (2023) *Country Report: Italy. 2022 Update*.
- AIDA (2024) *Country Report: Italy. 2023 Update*.
- AIDA (2025) *Country Report: Italy. 2024 Update*.
- Akin, D. (2017) Queer Asylum Seekers: Translating Sexuality in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43, pp. 458-474.
- Alloa, E. (2021) *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*. Translated by N. F. Schott. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ambrosini, M. (2018) *Irregular Immigration in Southern Europe: Actors, Dynamics and Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Amit, V. (2000) Introduction. In: id. (ed.) *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 1-18.
- Anderson, J. (2004) Talking Whilst Walking: A Geographical Archaeology of Knowledge. *Area*, 36 (3), pp. 254-261.
- Apostolova, R. (2015) Of Refugees and Migrants: Stigma, Politics, and Boundary Work at the Borders of Europe. *Section CULTURE (ASA's Culture Section)* [Online]. Available at: <https://asaculturesection.org/2015/09/14/of-refugees-and-migrants-stigma-politics-and-boundary-work-at-the-borders-of-europe/> [Accessed: 23/10/2025].
- Appadurai, A. (2003) Archive and Aspiration. *Information is Alive*, 2, pp. 14-25.
- Arondekar, A. (2009) *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Arondekar, A. (2023a) *Abundance: Sexuality's History*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Arondekar, A. (2023b) Afterword: Everywhere *Mehfil*. In: O. Kasmani (ed.) *Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, pp. 251-255.
- Arondekar, A. and Patel, G. (2016) Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 22 (2), pp. 151-171.
- Artero, M. and Chiodeli, F. (2020) Migration, Religion, and Residential Segregation at the Urban Level: The Case of Muslim Migrants in Rome and Milan. *Sociological Inquiry*, 90 (4), pp. 867-890.
- Aslan, E. H. (2015) Lollywood: Pakistani Cinema Through a Transitional Lens. *JISR-MSSE: JISR Management and Social Sciences & Economics*, 13 (1), pp. 81-91.
- Azim, S. and Bilkis, H. (2023) Spiral of Silence: LGBTQ Struggles in Bangladesh. In: P. Pain (ed.) *Global LGBTQ Activism: Social Media, Digital Technologies, and Protest Mechanisms*. New York, London: Routledge, pp. 300-312.
- Baas, M. (2016) Becoming Trans/Nationally Mobile: The Conflation of Internal and International Migration in the Trajectories of Indian Student-Migrants in Australia and Beyond. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39 (1), pp.14-28.
- Bacchetta, P. (1999) When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers. *Social Text*, 61, pp. 141-166.
- Bakewell, O. (2008) Research Beyond the Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21 (4), pp. 432-453.
- Bartlett, L., Oliveira G. and Ungemah, L. (2018) Cruel Optimism: Migration and Schooling for Dominican Newcomer Immigrant Youth. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 49 (4), pp. 444-461.
- Bassetti, E. (2019) Integration Challenges Faced by Transgender Refugees in Italy. In: A. Güler, M. Shevtsova and D. Venturi (eds.) *LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective: Persecution, Asylum and Integration*. Cham: Springer, pp. 337-348.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Bernard, H. R. (2011) *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Bertolani, B. (2005) I sikh in Emilia. In: D. Denti, M. Ferrari and F. Perocco (eds.) *I sikh. Storia e immigrazione*. Milano: Franco Angeli, pp. 163-76.
- Bertolani, B. (2018) Ways of Making Sikhi in Italy: Considerations from a Case Study of Sikh Youth. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 14 (3-4), pp. 364-383.
- Bertolani, B. (2020) Women and Sikhism in Theory and Practice: Normative Discourses, Seva Performances, and Agency in the Case Study of Some Young Sikh Women in Northern Italy. *Religions*, 11 (91), pp. 1-22.

- Bertolani, B. and Boccagni, P. (2022) Domestic Religion and the Migrant Home: The Private, the Diasporic and the Public in the Sacralization of Sikh Dwellings in Italy. *Ethnicities*, 0 (0), pp. 1-22.
- Bertolani, B. et al. (2011) Mirrors Games: A Fresco of Sikh Settlements among Italian Local Societies. In: K. Jacobsen and K. Myrvold (eds.) *Sikhs in Europe: Migration, Identities and Representations*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 133-61.
- Bertolani, B., Rinaldini, M. and Tognetti Bordogna, M. (2013) Famiglie dal Marocco, India, Pakistan. Ridefinizione della tradizione in un sistema di stratificazione civica. *Quaderni di sociologia*, 61, pp. 144-170.
- Bhardwaj, M. (2022) Queering Diasporic Desi Solidarity: South Asian Activism in US and UK Multiracial social Movements. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 25 (1), pp. 95-123.
- Bhatt, P.M. (2024). *'Dying' to be White: The Obsession with Fair Skin in India and the Global South*. New Delhi: Routledge India.
- Biehl, J. (2013) *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Bille, M., Hastrup, F. and Sørensen, T. F. (2010) *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*. New York: Springer.
- Bisio, N. (2013) Le donne bangladesi a Roma. Come si trasforma una comunità. *Storia delle donne*, 9, pp. 49-69.
- Boccaletti, L. and Mastellari, J. (2017) Italy report. Orgoglio e pregiudizio? Essere stranieri e LGBTI. In: T. Gavrielides (ed.) *Supporting and Including LGBTI Migrants: Needs, Experiences & Good Practices*. London: IARS Publications, pp. 32-45.
- Bonfanti, S. (2015) The "Marriage Market" among Punjabi Migrant Families in Italy: Designs, Resistances, and Gateways. *Human Affairs*, 25 (1), pp. 16-27.
- Bonfanti, S. (2016) Dislocating Punjabyat: Gendered Mobilities among Indian Diasporas in Italy. In: M. Gutekunst et al. (eds.) *Bounded Mobilities: Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.183-205.
- Bonfanti, S. (2017a) Soggettività Cosmopolite della Giovane Diaspora Indiana in Europa. *Meridiana: Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali*, 89 (2), pp. 95-115.
- Bonfanti, S. (2017b) A Taste of "Brownies": Shifting Color Lines among Indian Diasporas in Southern Europe. *Transnational Social Review*, 7 (3), pp. 258-272.
- Bonfanti, S. (2019) Intimità in movimento. Genealogie domestiche della diaspora panjabi italiana. In: B. Riccio (ed.) *Mobilità. Incursioni etnografiche*. Milano: Mondadori, pp. 153-177.

- Bonizzoni, P. and Marzorati, R. (2015) Local Immigrant Incorporation Pathways in Small-Scale Cities: Pakistani Immigrants in a Province of Northern Italy. *Sociologica*, 2, 1-28.
- Borghi, R. (2020) *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema-mondo*. Milano: Meltemi editore.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bose, B. and Bhattacharya S. (2007) Introduction. In: id. (eds.) *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp. ix-xxxii.
- Bose, B. (2014) Notes on Queer Politics in South Asia and its Diaspora. In: E. L. McCallum and M. Tuhkanen (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 498-51.
- Bragin, N. (2014) Techniques of Black Male Re/Dress: Corporeal Drag and Kinesthetic Politics in the Rebirth of Waacking/Punkin'. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 24 (1), pp. 61-78.
- Brah, A. (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) To Saturate or Not to Saturate? Questioning Data Saturation as a Useful Concept for Thematic Analysis and Sample-Size Rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13 (2), pp. 201-216.
- Burger, T. et al. (2024). *The Multi-Sided Ethnographer: Living the Field beyond Research*. Verlag: transcript.
- Büscher, M., Urry, J. and Witchger, K. (eds.) (2011) *Mobile Methods*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1988) Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40 (4), pp. 519-531.
- Butler, J. (1993a) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Second edition. London, New York: Routledge.
- Buxton, R. and Gibney, M. J. (2025) Should Refugees Be Grateful? *Political Studies*, 73 (1), pp. 287-304.
- Çakırlar, C. (2016) Introduction to Queer/ing Regions. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23 (11), pp. 1615-1618.
- Callahan, I. and Loscocco, K. (2021) The Prevalence and Persistence of Homophobia in Italy. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 70 (2), pp. 228-249.

- Camera dei Deputati – Servizio Studi (2024) *Diritto di asilo e accoglienza dei migranti sul territorio* [Online]. Available at: https://temi.camera.it/leg19/temi/19_t118_accoglienza_dei_migranti_sul_territorio.html [Accessed 31/01/2026].
- Campesi, G. (2018) Between Containment, Confinement and Dispersal: The Evolution of the Italian Reception System Before and After the ‘Refugee Crisis’. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 23 (4), pp. 490-506.
- Campomori, F. and Ambrosini, M. (2020) Multilevel Governance in Trouble: The Implementation of Asylum Seekers’ Reception in Italy as a Battleground. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8 (1), pp. 1-19.
- Cantú, L. (2009) *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*. New York: New York University Press.
- Caputo, V. (2000) At ‘Home’ and ‘Away’: Reconfiguring the Field for Late Twentieth-Century Anthropology. In: V. Amit (ed.) *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 19-31.
- Carling, J. (2002) Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28 (1), pp. 5-42.
- Carling, J. (2014) *The Role of Aspirations in Migration*. Paper Presented at Determinants of International Migration, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, no. September: pp. 1-12.
- Carling, J. and Collins, F. (2020) Introduction: Aspiration, Desire and Drivers of Migration. In: id. (eds.) *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-18.
- Carling, J. and Schewel, K. (2020) Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration. In: J. Carling and F. Collins (eds.) *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Carminati, L. (2018) Generalizability in Qualitative Research: A Tale of Two Traditions. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28 (13), pp. 2094-2101.
- Carnassale, D. (2013) La diversità imprevista. Negoziamenti della maschilità, fluttuazioni identitarie e traiettorie alternative di migranti africani in Italia. *Mondi migranti*, 3 (3), pp. 67-94.
- Carnassale, D. (2021a) Corpi divergenti, discorsi dissonanti. Rappresentazioni della sessualità tra uomini in Senegal. *Illuminazioni*, 55, pp. 258-305.
- Carnassale, D. (2021b) Non-Heteronormative Masculinities and Religious Attitudes of Senegalese Migrants Living in Italy. *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 3, pp. 455-475.

- Carnassale, D. (2023) Undoing the Boundaries of Heteronormative Masculinity: Transnational Experiences of Senegalese MSM Living in Italy. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 18 (4), pp. 326-342.
- Carrillo, H. (2004) Sexual Migration, Cross-Cultural Sexual Encounters, and Sexual Health. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 1 (3), pp. 58-70.
- Carrillo, H. (2017) *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Casas-Cortes, M. et al. (2015) New Keywords: Migration and Borders. *Cultural Studies*, 29 (1), pp. 55-87.
- Castro, A. and Carnassale, D. (2019) Loving More Than One Color: Bisexuals of Color in Italy Between Stigma and Resilience. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 19 (2), pp. 198-228.
- Catarci, M. (2014) Considerazioni critiche sulla nozione di integrazione di migranti e rifugiati. *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 22, pp. 71-84.
- Cavarero, A. (2002) Il pensiero femminista. Un approccio teoretico. In: A. Cavarero and F. Restaino (eds.) *Le filosofie femministe*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori, pp. 78-115.
- Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS (2024) *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2024*. Roma: IDOS.
- Chakravarty, A. (2023) Film(i) Culture after Film: Lip-sync Media and the Expanded Archive of Hindi Cinema. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 14 (2), pp. 186-209.
- Chang, S. (2019) Section 377 and Section 377A. In: H. Chiang and A. Arondekar (eds.) *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History*. Farmington Hills: Charles Scribner and Sons, pp. 1419-1423.
- Chattopadhyay, S. and Tyner, J. A. (2022) Lives in Waiting. *Geopolitics*, 27 (4), pp. 1231-1256.
- Chávez, K. R. and Luibhéid, E. (2020) Introduction. In: E. Luibhéid and K. R. Chávez (eds.) *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 1-15.
- Chen, K. (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Chiang, H. and Wong, A. K. (2016) Queering the Transnational Turn: Regionalism and Queer Asias. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23 (11), pp. 1643-1656.
- Chiang, H. and Wong, A. K. (2017) Asia is Burning: Queer Asia as Critique. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 58 (2), pp. 121-126.
- Chu, A. L. (2018) On Liking Women. *n+1*, 30 [Online]. Available at: <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/> [Accessed: 09/01/2026].
- Chu, A. L. and E. H. Drager (2019) After Trans Studies. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6 (1), pp. 103-116.

- Clifford, J. (1997) *Routes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clini, C. (2014) Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed. Indian Films, British Networks and the Sikh Diaspora in Italy. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11 (2-3), pp. 203-217.
- Coates, J. (2019) The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the “Good Life” among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo. *positions*, 27 (3), pp. 469-497.
- Collins, F. L. (2018) Desire as a Theory for Migration Studies: Temporality, Assemblage and Becoming in the Narratives of Migrants. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (6), pp. 964-980.
- Collyer, M., and de Haas, H. (2012) Developing Dynamic Categorisations of Transit Migration. *Population, Space and Place*, 18 (4), pp. 468–481.
- Colucci, M. (2018) *Storia dell’immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*. Roma: Carocci editore.
- Cotten, T. T. (ed.) (2012) *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Crapanzano, V. (1980) *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Crawley, H. and Skleparis, D. (2018) Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (1), pp. 48-64.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1 (8), pp. 139-167.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6), pp. 1241-1299.
- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern western World*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Cresswell, T. (2010). Towards a Politics of Mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28 (1), pp. 17-31
- Cruz-Malavé, A. and Manalansan IV, M. F. (eds.) (2002) *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Curcio, A. (2024) *L’Italia è un paese razzista*. Bologna: DeriveApprodi.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dahinden, J. (2016) A Plea for the “De-Migrantization” of Research on Migration and Integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39 (13), pp. 2207-2225.

- Dahinden, J., Fischer, C. and Menet, J. (2021) Knowledge Production, Reflexivity, and the Use of Categories in Migration Studies: Tackling Challenges in the Field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44 (4), pp. 535-554.
- Danisi, C. et al. (2021) *Queering Asylum in Europe: Legal and Social Experiences of Seeking International Protection on grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. Cham: Springer.
- Das Gupta, M. (2006) *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dasgupta, R. K. and Mahn, C. (2023) Between Visibility and Elsewhere: South Asian Queer Creative Cultures and Resistance. *South Asian Diaspora*, 15 (1), pp. 1-16.
- Dave, N. D. (2011) Abundance and Loss: Queer Intimacies in South Asia. *Feminist Studies*, 37 (1), pp. 14-27.
- Dave, N. D. (2012) *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- De Capitani, C. and Del Guercio, A. (2021) L'Europa come zona di libertà per i migranti LGBTIQ+. In: F. Amato (ed.) *Genere, sesso, migrazione. Riflessioni transdisciplinari*. Roma: DeriveApprodi, pp. 105-123.
- de Haas, H. (2014) Migration Theory: Quo Vadis?. *IMI Working Papers Series*, 100, pp. 1-39.
- De Lauretis, T. (1991) Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3 (2), pp. iii-xviii.
- De Michele, A. (2021) (R)esistenze a Roma Est. La produzione di soggettività impreviste a partire dalla scena artistico-musicale underground di un quartiere romano. *Tracce urbane. Rivista italiana transdisciplinare di studi urbani*, (9), pp. 197-216.
- Decena, C. U. (2008) Tacit Subjects. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14 (2-3), pp. 339-359.
- Decena, C. U. (2011) *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- degli Uberti, S. (2019) «Migrare restando a casa». Pratiche di mobilità e immaginari migratori in Senegal. In: B. Riccio (ed.) *Mobilità. Incursioni etnografiche*. Milano: Mondadori, pp. 23-63.
- degli Uberti, S. (2021) Unveiling Informality through Im/mobility: Conceptual Analysis of Asylum Seekers and Refugees at the Margins of the Reception System in Italy. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26 (5), pp. 528-551.
- Della Puppa, F. (2014) *Uomini in movimento. Il lavoro della maschilità tra Bangladesh e Italia*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.

- Della Puppa, F. (2018) Ambivalences of the Emotional Logics of Migration and Family Reunification: Emotions, Experiences and Aspirations of Bangladeshi Husbands and Wives in Italy. *Identities*, 25 (3), pp. 358-375.
- Della Puppa, F. (2019) Transnational Families and Migrant Masculinities: The Social Institution of Male Adulthood and Family Reunification in the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Italy. *Dve Domovini*, 50, pp. 111-128.
- Della Puppa, F. and Ambrosini, M. (2022) 'Implicit' Remittances in Family Relationships: The Case of Bangladeshis in Italy and Beyond. *Global Networks*, 22 (1), pp. 134-149.
- Della Puppa, F. and King, R. (2018) The New 'Twice Migrants': Motivations, Experiences and Disillusionments of Italian-Bangladeshis Relocating to London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45 (11), pp. 1936-1952.
- Della Puppa, F. and Sanò, G. (2020) Il prisma della (im)mobilità. Pratiche di appaesamento e esperienze di immobilità di richiedenti asilo e rifugiati, in un'etnografia multisituata tra Nord e Sud Italia. *Studi Emigrazione*, LVII (220), pp. 582-598.
- Della Puppa, F. and Sanò, G. (2021) The Prism of New Mobilities: The Mobility Trajectories of Refugees and Asylum Seekers Outside the Italian Reception System. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26 (5), pp. 503-527.
- Della Puppa, F. and Sredanovic, D. (2017) Citizen to Stay or Citizen to Go? Naturalisation, Security, and Mobility of Migrants in Italy. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 15 (4), 366-383.
- Denti, D., Ferrari M. and Perocco, F. (eds.) (2005) *I Sikh: Storia e Immigrazione*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Desjarlais, R. (2003) *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Di Felicianantonio, C. (2021) (Un)Ethical Boundaries: Critical Reflections on What We Are (Not) Supposed to Do. *The Professional Geographer*, 73 (3), pp. 496-503.
- DJ Ritu and Marshall, L. (2022) Club Kali. In: A. N. Furman and J. Mardell (eds.) *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories*. Portland, London: RIBA Publishing, pp. 92-93.
- Drozdowski, D. (2016) Encountering Memory in the Everyday City. In: D. Drozdowski, S. De Nardi, and E. Waterton (eds.) *Memory, Place and Identity: Commemoration and Remembrance of War and Conflict*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 19-37.
- Dutta, A. and Roy, R. (2014) Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (3), pp. 320-337.
- Eastmond, M. (1996) Luchar y Sufrir – Stories of Life and Exile: Reflexions on the Ethnographic Process. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 61 (3-4), pp. 231-250.

- Eastmond, M. (2007) Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20 (2), pp. 248-264.
- Edwards, E. (2015) Anthropology and Photography: A Long History of Knowledge and Affect. *Photographies*, 8 (3), pp. 235-252.
- Eng, D. L., Halberstam, J. and Muñoz, J. E. (2005) What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?. *Social Text*, 23 (3-4), pp.1-17.
- Erdal, M. B. and Ceri Oeppen, C. (2018) Forced to Leave? The Discursive and Analytical Significance of Describing Migration as Forced and Voluntary. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), pp. 981-998.
- Fabian, J. (2014) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Faizan, R. (2022) "Nobody Looks at Our Hearts": Transgender Dancers on Pakistani Screens. *Reel Pakistan: A Screen Studies Forum*, 4, pp. 4-14.
- Favell, A. (2007) Rebooting Migration Theory: Interdisciplinarity, Globality and Postdisciplinarity in Migration Studies. In: C. Brettell and J. Hollifield (eds.) *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 259-278
- Favell, A. (2019) Integration: Twelve Propositions After Schinkel. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7 (21), pp. 1-10.
- Ferrara, C. (2019) *Orientamento sessuale e identità di genere. Immigrazione e accoglienza*. Paestum: Pandemos.
- Ferrara, C. et al. (eds.) (2021) *I have a dream: studi e strumenti per il lavoro con migranti LGBTI*. Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica.
- Ferraris, F. (2009) Going Rural and Urban at Once: Reflections from the Roman Sikh Context. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 24 (3), pp. 305-18.
- Ferraris, F. and Sai, S. (2014) Sikhs in Italy: Khalsa Identity from Mimesis to Display. In: E. Gallo (ed.) *Migration and Religion in Europe: Comparative Perspectives on South Asian Experiences*, Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 185-206.
- Ferreira, N. (2022) Utterly Unbelievable: The Discourse of 'Fake' SOGI Asylum Claims as a Form of Epistemic Injustice. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 34 (3-4), pp. 303-326.
- Fobear, K. (2016) Nesting Bodies: Exploration of the Body and Embodiment in LGBT Refugee Oral History and Participatory Photography. *Social Alternatives*, 35 (3), pp. 33-43.
- Fontanari, E. (2019) *Lives in Transit: An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity across European Borders*. London, New York: Routledge.

- Fortier, A. (2002) Queer Diaspora. In: D. Richardson and S. Seidman (eds.) *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 183-197.
- Fortier, A. (2003) Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment. In: S. Ahmed et al. (eds.) *Uprootings/Regroundings Questions of Home and Migration*. Oxford, New York: Berg, pp. 115-135.
- Gabaccia, D. R. (2013) *Italy's Many Diasporas*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Gallo, E. (2005) Unorthodox Sisters: Gender Relations and Generational Change among Malayali Migrants in Italy. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 12 (2-3), pp. 217-251.
- Gallo, E. (2006) Italy Is Not a Good Place for Men: Narratives of Places, Marriage and Masculinity among Malayali Migrants. *Global Networks*, 6 (4), pp. 357-372
- Gallo, E. (2012) Creating Gurdwaras, Narrating Histories: Perspectives on the Sikh Diaspora in Italy. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 6, pp. 1-18.
- Gallo, E. and Sai, S. (2013) Should We Talk About Religions? Migrant Associations, Local Politics and Representations of Religious Diversity in Central Italy: The case of Sikh Communities in Central Italy. In: J. Mapril and R. Blanes (eds.) *The Best of All Gods: The Sites and Politics of Religious Diversity in Southern Europe*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 279-308.
- Garelli, G. and Tazzioli, M. (2013a) Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, An Introduction. *Postcolonial Studies*, 16 (3), pp. 245-249.
- Garelli, G. and Tazzioli, M. (2013b) Double Opening, Split Temporality, and New Spatialities: An Interview with Sandro Mezzadra on 'Militant Research'. *Postcolonial Studies*, 16 (3), pp. 309-319.
- Garha, N. S. (2020a) Masculinity in the Sikh Community in Italy and Spain: Expectations and Challenges. *Religions*, 11 (2), p. 76.
- Garha, N. S. (2020b) Indian Immigration to Italy: Concentration, Internal Mobility and Economic Crisis. *South Asian Diaspora*, 20 (1), pp. 51-72.
- Gartner, J. L. (2015) (In)credibly Queer: Sexuality-based Asylum in the European Union. In: A. Chase (ed.) *Transatlantic Perspectives on Diplomacy and Diversity: Select Essays from the 2014 Diplomacy and Diversity Fellowship*. New York: Humanity in Action Press, pp. 39-66.
- Gere, D. (2001) 29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy. In: J. Desmond (ed.) *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 349-381.
- Giametta, C. (2017) *The Sexual Politics of Asylum: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the UK Asylum System*. New York: Routledge.

- Giametta, C. (2020) New Asylum Protection Categories and Elusive Filtering Devices: The Case of 'Queer Asylum' in France and the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46 (1), pp. 142-157.
- Giametta, C. (2022) What's Sex Got to Do with It? Migration Studies Meets Sexualities. *Reflexivities in Migration Studies Blog* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.imiscoe.org/news-and-blog/sc-blogs/reflex-studies/1562-what-s-sex-got-to-do-with-it-migration-studies-meets-sexualities> [Accessed: 20/10/25].
- Glick Schiller, N. and Salazar, N. B. (2013) Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39 (2), pp. 183-200.
- Gopinath, G. (2005) *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gopinath, G. (2007) Queer Regions: Locating Lesbians in Sancharram. In: G. E. Haggerty and M. McGarry (eds.) *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gopinath, G. (2018) *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gordon, A. F. (2008) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Second edition. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gorman-Murray, A. (2009) Intimate Mobilities: Emotional Embodiment and Queer Migration. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10 (4), pp. 441-460.
- Günel, G., Varma, S. and Watanabe, C. (2020) A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography. *Member Voices, Fieldsights*, 9 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> [Accessed 18/02/2026].
- Günel, G. and Watanabe, C. (2023) Patchwork Ethnography. *American Ethnologist: Journal of the American Ethnological Society*, 51, pp. 131-139.
- Gupta, A. and Ferguson J. (eds.) (1997) *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gupta, A. and Ferguson, J. (1992) Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), pp. 6-23.
- Habib, S. (ed.) (2010) *Islam and Homosexuality*. Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO.
- Halberstam, J. (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Halperin, D. M. (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Halperin, D. M. (2003) The Normalization of Queer Theory. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45 (2-3-4), pp. 339-343.
- Hamzić, V. (2016) *Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Muslim World: History, Law and Vernacular Knowledge*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Hannam, K., Sheller, M., and Urry, J. (2006) Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings. *Mobilities*, 1 (1), pp. 1-22.
- Held, N. (2017) “They Look at You Like an Insect That Wants to Be Squashed”: An Ethnographic Account of the Racialized Sexual Spaces of Manchester’s Gay Village. *Sexualities*, 20 (5-6), pp. 535-557.
- Held, N. (2023) “As queer refugees, we are out of category, we do not belong to one, or the other”: LGBTIQ+ Refugees’ Experiences in “Ambivalent” Queer Spaces. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46 (9), pp. 1898-1918.
- Hemmaty, M. (2024) The Cruel Optimism of Work Permits: Vulnerabilities and Deportability Among Rejected Asylum-Seekers and International Students Pursuing Track Changes in Sweden. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, pp. 1-14.
- Horton, B. A. (2018a) What’s So ‘Queer’ About Coming Out? Silent Queers and Theorizing Kinship Agonistically in Mumbai. *Sexualities*, 21 (7), pp. 1059-1074.
- Horton, B. A. (2018b) The Queer Turn in South Asian Studies? or “That’s Over & Done Queen, On to the Next”. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 5 (3), pp. 165-180.
- Hossain, A. (2018) De-Indianizing Hijra: Intraregional Effacements and Inequalities in South Asian Queer Spaces. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 5 (3), pp. 321-331.
- Hossain, A. (2019a) Section 377, Same-Sex Sexualities and the Struggle for Sexual Rights in Bangladesh. *Australian Journal of Asian Law*, 20 (1), pp. 115-125.
- Hossain, A. (2019b) Roopban. In: H. Chiang and A. Arondekar (eds.) *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History*. Farmington Hills: Charles Scribner and Sons, pp. 1390-1391.
- Hossain, A. and Nanda, S. (2020) Globalization and Change among the Hijras of South Asia. In: J. M. Ryan (ed.) *Trans Lives in a Globalizing World: Rights, Identities, and Politics*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 34-49.
- Hossain, A., Pamment, C. and Roy, J. (2023) *Badhai: Hijra-Khwaja Sira-Trans Performance Across Borders in South Asia*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Humbracht, M., Williams, A. M. and Cohen S. (2023) Cruel (Im)mobilities and the Nearly Utopian Intimacies of Italian Migrants’ Personal Relationships. *Global Networks*, 23, pp. 188-202.

- Ingold, T. and Vergunst, J. L. (eds.) (2008) *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Ingvars, Á. K. (2024) Event(ual) Queer Crafting of Dublin Regulated Sogíe Refugees. *Italian Sociological Review*, 14 (9S), pp. 341-362.
- Jacobsen, C. M. (2021) 'They said wait, wait—and I waited': The Power Chronographies of Waiting for Asylum in Marseille, France. In: C. M. Jacobsen, M. A. Karlsen and S. Khosravi (eds.) *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. New York, London: Routledge, pp. 40-56.
- Jacobsen, K. and Landau, L. B. (2003) The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration. *Disasters*, 27 (3), pp. 185-206.
- Jagose, A. (1996) *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jakobsen, J. R. (1998) Queer Is? Queer Does? Normativity and the Problem of Resistance. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, 4 (4), pp. 511-536.
- Jansen, S., and Spijkerboer, T. (2011) *Fleeing Homophobia. Asylum Claims Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe*. COC Nederland: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
- Jeffrey, C. (2017) Timepass. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 40 (2), pp. 407-409.
- Johal, R. K. and Sunar, K. K. (2025) Triñjaṇ Audiotopias: Complaint, Desire, and the Bawdy in Punjabi Giddhā Performance Practices. In: R. Kapuria and V. Duggal (eds.) *Punjab Sounds: In and Beyond the Region*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 93-123.
- Johnson, B. (1986) Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion. *Diacritics* 16 (1), pp. 26-47.
- Joseph, M. (2002) *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kallio, K. P., Häkli, J. and Pascucci, E. (2019) Refugeeeness as Political Subjectivity: Experiencing the Humanitarian Border. *EPC: Politics and Space*, 37 (7), pp. 1258-1276.
- Kanaaneh, R. (2023) *The Right Kind of Suffering: Gender, Sexuality, and Arab Asylum Seekers in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Kao, G. and Tienda, M. (1995) Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth. *Social Science Quarterly*, 76, pp. 1-19.
- Kapferer, B. and Theodossopoulos, D. (eds.) (2016) *Against Exoticism: Toward the Transcendence of Relativism and Universalism in Anthropology*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Karim, S. (2014) Erotic Desires and Practices in Cyberspace: "Virtual Reality" of the Non-Heterosexual Middle Class in Bangladesh. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 18 (1), pp. 53-76.
- Kasmani, O. (2023) Introduction: *stan. In: (id.) (ed.) *Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.

- Katz, J. (1990) The Invention of Heterosexuality. *Socialist Review*, 20 (1), pp. 7-34.
- Katz, J. (1995) *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York: Dutton.
- Kawale, R. (2003) Kiss Is Just a Kiss ... Or Is It? South Asian Lesbian and Bisexual Women and the Construction of Space. In: N. Puwar and P. Raghuram (eds.) *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 181–199.
- Khan, F. A. (2014a) *Khwaja Sira: Culture, Identity Politics, and “Transgender” Activism in Pakistan*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Syracuse University.
- Khan, F. A. (2014b) Khwaja Sira: Transgender Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan. In: S. Snow Wadley (ed.) *South Asia in the World: An Introduction*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Khan, F. A. (2016) Khwaja Sira Activism: The Politics of Gender Ambiguity in Pakistan. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3, (1-2), pp. 158-164.
- Khan, F. A. (2019a) “Queer” Pakistan. In: H. Chiang and A. Arondekar (eds.) *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History*. Farmington Hills: Charles Scribner and Sons, pp. 1194-1197.
- Khan, F. A. (2019b) Translucent Citizenship: *Khwaja Sira* Activism and Alternatives to Dissent in Pakistan. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 20, pp. 1-23.
- Khan, M. B. (2022) Vernacular Visual Aesthetic: The Genre of Digital Punjabi Stage Dramas. *Reel Pakistan: A Screen Studies Forum*, 4, pp. 54-63.
- khanna, a. (2007) Us ‘Sexuality Types’: A Critical Engagement with the Postcoloniality of Sexuality. In: B. Bose and S. Bhattacharyya, S. (eds.) *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp. 159-200.
- khanna, a. (2016) *Sexualness*. New Delhi: New Text.
- Khubchandani, K. (2016) LGBT Activism in South Asia. In: N. A. Naples (ed.) *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 1-5.
- Khubchandani, K. (2020) *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Lifestyle*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Khubchandani, K. (2022) Critical Aunty Studies: An Auntdroduction. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 42 (3), pp. 221-245.
- Kiaer, J. and Kim, L. (2014) *The Language of Asian Gestures: Embodied Words Through the Lens of Film*. London, New York: Routledge.
- King, R. (ed.) (1993) *The New Geography of European Migration*. London: Belhaven Press.
- King, R. (2002) Towards a New Map of European Migration. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8, pp. 89-106.

- King, R. (2013) Theories and Typologies of Migration: An Overview and a Primer. *Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations*, 3 (12), pp. 3-43.
- King, R. and Black, R. (eds.) (1997) *Southern Europe and the New Immigrations*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- King, R. and DeBono, D. (2013) Irregular migration and the ‘Southern European model’ of migration. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 22 (1), pp. 1-31.
- King, R. and Della Puppa, F. (2020) Times of Work and Social Life: Bangladeshi Migrant in Northeast Italy and London. *International Migration Review*, 55 (2), pp. 402-430.
- King, R. and Skeldon, R. (2010) Mind the Gap! Integrating Approaches to Internal and International Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36 (10), pp. 1619-1646.
- King, R., Lazaridis, G. and Tsardanidis, C. (eds.) (2000) *Eldorado or Fortress? Migration in Southern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kleist, N. and Thorsen, D. (2017) *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Klykken, F. H. (2021) Implementing Continuous Consent in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*, 22 (5), pp. 795-810.
- Knights, M. (1996) Bangladeshi Immigrants in Italy: From Geopolitics to Micropolitics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21 (1), pp. 105-123.
- Knights, M. and King, R. (1998) The Geography of Bangladeshi Migration to Rome. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 4, pp. 299- 321.
- Knowles, C. (2000) Here and There: Doing Transnational Fieldwork. In: V. Amit (ed.) *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 54-70.
- Koçak, M. (2020) Who is “Queerer” and Deserves Resettlement? Queer Asylum Seekers and Their Deservingness of Refugee Status in Turkey. *Middle East Critique*, 29 (1), pp. 29-46.
- Koikkalainen, S. (2019) Free Movement and EU Citizenship from the Perspective of Intra-European Mobility. In: R. Bauböck, (ed.) *Debating European Citizenship*. Cham: Springer, pp. 121-124.
- Koser, K. and Martin, S. (2011) The Migration-Displacement Nexus. In: (id.) (eds.) *The Migration Displacement Nexus: Patterns, Processes and Policies*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 1-13.
- Kosnick, K. (2011) Sexuality and Migration Studies: The Invisible, the Oxymoronic and Heteronormative Othering. In: H. Lutz, M. T. Herrera Vivar, and L. Supik (eds.) *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 121-135.
- Koutonin, M. R. (2015) Why Are White People Expats When the Rest of Us Are Immigrants. *The Guardian* [Online], 13 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development->

09/01/2026].

- Krause, U. and Schmidt, H. (2020) Refugees as Actors? Critical Reflections on Global Refugee Policies on Self-reliance and Resilience. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 33 (1), pp. 22-41.
- Kugle S. S. A. (2010) *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Kulick, D. and Wilson, M. (eds.) (1995) *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London, New York: Routledge
- Kusenbach, M. (2003) Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool. *Ethnography*, 4 (3), pp. 455-485.
- Langellier, K. M. (1999) Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19 (2), pp. 125-144.
- Lelleri, R. (ed.) (2009) *La Montagna e la Catena. Essere Migranti Omosessuali Oggi in Italia*. Bologna: Arcigay [Online]. Available at: <http://www.lelleri.it/report/LaMontagnaELaCatena.pdf> [Accessed: 08/04/2023].
- Lelleri, R. and Pozzoli, L. (2009) Essere Giovani Gay nella Migrazione: Evidenze e Considerazioni Iniziali. In: L. M. Visconti and E. M. Napolitano (eds.) *Cross Generation Marketing*. Milano: Egea.
- Lempert, M. (2019) What is an anthropology of gesture? *Gesture*, 18 (2-3), pp. 173-208.
- Lewin, E. (2016) Who's Queer? What's Queer? Queer Anthropology through the Lens of Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*, 31 (4), pp. 598-606.
- Lewis, R. A. and Naples, N. A. (2014) Introduction: Queer Migration, Asylum, and Displacement. *Sexualities*, 17 (8), pp. 911-918.
- Luibhéid, E. (2004) Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship: A Call for Change. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2), pp. 227-235.
- Luibhéid, E. (2005) Introduction: Queering Migration and Citizenship. In: E. Luibhéid and L. Cantú (eds.) *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. ix-xlvi.
- Luibhéid, E. (2013) *Pregnant on Arrival: Making the Illegal Immigrant*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Luibhéid, E. and Cantú, L. (eds.) (2005) *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossing*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Luibhéid, E. and Chavez, K. R. (eds.) (2020) *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

- Lum, K. (2012) *Indian Diversities in Italy: Italian Case Study*. CARIM-India RR, 2012/02, San Domenico di Fiesole: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.
- Luther, J. D. (2023) *Queering Normativity and South Asian Public Culture: Wrong Readings Only*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mahn, C., Ritu, D. J., and Dasgupta, R. K. (2025) *Desi Queers: LGBTQ+ South Asians and Cultural Belonging in Britain*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mai, N. and King, R. (2009) Love, Sexuality and Migration: Mapping the Issue(s). *Mobilities*, 4 (3), pp. 295-307.
- Mains, D. (2012) Imagining Hopeful Futures through Khat and Film. In: (id.) *Hope Is Cut Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 43-66.
- Mainwaring, C. and Brigden M. (2016) Beyond the Border: Clandestine Migration Journeys. *Geopolitics*, 21 (2), pp. 243-262.
- Malkki, L. H. (1995) Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 495-523.
- Malkki, L. H. (1996) Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Anthropology*, 11 (3), pp. 377-404.
- Mallett, W. (2016) The Changing Face of Documentary Distribution: The 17th Annual Hot Docs Forum'. *Filmmaker Magazine* [Online]. Available at: <https://filmmakermagazine.com/98417-the-changing-face-documentary-distribution-the-17th-annual-hot-docs-forum/> [Accessed: 10/12/2025]
- Manalansan IV, M. F. (2003) *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Manalansan IV, M. F. (2006) Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies. *International Migration Review*, 40 (1), pp. 224-249.
- Mangone, E. and Masullo, G. (2017) Razzializzazione, raceblindness e processi d'integrazione. Il migrante omosessuale nella comunità lgbt italiana. In: C. Bonifazi (ed.) *Migrazioni e integrazioni nell'Italia di oggi*. Roma: CNR-IRPPS e-Publishing, pp. 255-265.
- Mannay, D. (2016) *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Marchetti, C. (2020) (Un)deserving Refugees: Contested Access to the 'Community of Value' in Italy. In: E. M. Goździak, I. Main and B. Suter (eds.) *Europe and the Refugee Response: A Crisis of Values?* London, New York: Routledge, pp. 236-252.

- Marcus, G. E. (1995) Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1), pp. 95-117.
- Martorano, N. and Prearo, M. (eds.) (2020) *Migranti LGBT: Pratiche, Politiche e Contesti di Accoglienza*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- Masullo, G. (2015) Migrant Sexualities: “Non-normative” Sexual Orientation between Country of Origin and Destination. *Italian Sociological Review*, 5 (3), pp. 383-398.
- Masullo, G. and Ferrara, C. (2020) Border Sexuality: Identity Experiences and Inclusion Paths of Women with Non-Heteronormative Sexual Orientations Born from Mixed Couples. *REMHU, Revista Interdisciplinar de Mobilidade Humana*, 28 (59), pp. 31-48.
- Masullo, G. and Ferrara, C. (2021) Intersectionality and the Subjective Process of LBQ Migrant Women: Between Discrimination and Self-Determination. *Italian Sociological Review*, 11 (1), pp. 39-61.
- Matta, M. (2016) From ‘Madwoman in the Attic’ to ‘Queer Stranger in the Closet’: Sexuality and Migration at the Crossroads. In: S. Paunksnis (ed.) *Dislocating Globality: Deterritorialization, Difference and Resistance*. Leiden: Brill Rodopi, pp. 97-126.
- McCann, H. and Monaghan, W. (2020) *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*. London: Red Globe Press.
- McWilliams J. A. and Bonet, S. W. (2016) Continuums of Precarity: Refugee Youth Transitions in American High Schools. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35 (2), pp. 153-170.
- Medaglia, A. (2020) Migranti, Orientamento Sessuale e Identità di Genere. In: C. B. Mancini, M. Stranges and G. Vingeli (eds.) *Migrazioni. Percorsi interdisciplinari*. Milano, Udine: Mimesis Edizioni.
- Medhurst, E. (2023) Flags and Fashion: Expressions of Solidarity through Lesbian Clothing. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28 (1), pp. 8-23.
- Mezzadra, S. (2001) *Diritto di fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione*. Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Mezzadra, S. (2004) The Right to Escape. *Ephemera*, 4 (3), pp. 267-275.
- Mezzadra, S. and Neilson, B. (2013) *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mini, D. S. and Baishya, A. K. (2022) Towards an Incomplete Repertoire of South Asian Pornographies: Challenges, Potentials, and Futures. *Porn Studies*, 9 (3), pp. 263-272.
- Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali (2023a) *La comunità bangladese in Italia. Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti*.
- Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali (2023b) *La comunità indiana in Italia. Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti*.

- Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali (2023c) *La comunità pakistana in Italia. Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti*.
- Ministero dell'Interno (n.a.a) *Centri per l'immigrazione. Sistema di accoglienza sul territorio* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/sistema-accoglienza-sul-territorio/centri-limmigrazione> [Accessed: 15/01/2026].
- Ministero dell'Interno (n.a.b) *Procedure flussi* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/servizi/servizi-line/procedure-flussi> [Accessed 21/01/2026].
- Mitchell, W. (2002) Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1 (2), pp. 165-181.
- Mole, R. C. M. (ed.) (2021) *Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe*. London: UCL Press.
- Morad, M. (2021) Transnational Cross-Border Family Ties: Diasporic Lives of Bangladeshis in Italy and Beyond. *Genealogy*, 5 (106), pp. 1-17.
- Morad, M. and Gombač, J. (2015) Transmigrants, Transnational Linkages and Ways of Belonging: The Case of Bangladeshi Migrants in Italy. *Dve Domovini*, 41, pp. 61-76.
- Morad, M. and Sacchetto, D. (2020) Multiple Migration and Use of Ties: Bangladeshis in Italy and Beyond. *International Migration*, 58 (4), pp. 154-167.
- Morad, M., Della Puppa, F. and Sacchetto, D. (2021) The Dark Side of Onward Migration: Experiences and Strategies of Italian-Bangladeshis in the UK at the Time of the Post-Brexit Referendum. *The British journal of sociology*, 72 (5), pp. 1311-1324.
- Morcom, A. (2013) *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mount, L. (2020) "I Am Not a Hijra": Class, Respectability, and the Emergence of the "New" Transgender Woman in India. *Gender & Society*, 34 (4), pp. 620-647.
- Müller-Funk, L., Üstübici, A. and Belloni, M. (2023) Daring to Aspire: Theorising Aspirations in Contexts of Displacement and Highly Constrained Mobility. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49 (15), pp. 3816-3835.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1996) Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8 (2), pp. 5-16.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999) *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2019) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Second Edition. New York: New York University Press.
- Munthali, A. (2001) Doing Fieldwork at Home: Some Personal Experiences among the Tumbuka of Northern Malawi. *African Anthropologist*, 8 (2), pp. 114-136.

- Murray, D. A. B. (2016) *Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus*. London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nadeem, S. (2014) 'Fair and Anxious: On Mimicry and Skin-Lightening in India'. *Social Identities*, 20 (2-3), pp. 224–238.
- Namaste, V. K. (2000) *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nanda, S. (1999) *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Second edition. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Narrain, A. (2007) No Shortcuts to Queer Utopia: Sodomy, Law and Social Change. In: B. Bose, B. and S. Bhattacharyya (eds.) *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, pp. 255-262.
- Nawyn, S. J. (2010) Gender and Migration: Integrating Feminist Theory into Migration Studies. *Sociology Compass*, 4 (9), pp. 749-765.
- Nikielska-Sekula, K. and Desille, A. (2021) *Visual Methodology in Migration Studies: New Possibilities, Theoretical Implications, and Ethical Questions*. Cham: Springer.
- Nimführ, S. and Sesay, B. (2019) Lost in Limbo? Navigating (Im)Mobilities and Practices of Appropriation of Nondeportable Refugees in the Mediterranean Area. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7 (26).
- Nisar, M. A. (2022) *Governing Thirdness: State, Society, and Non-Binary Identities in Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nobil, A. (2007) The Myth of Arrival: Pakistanis in Italy. In: V. S. Kalra (ed.) *Pakistani Diasporas Culture, Conflict, and Change*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 75-98.
- Novoa, A. (2015) Mobile Ethnography: Emergence, Techniques and its Importance to Geography. *Human Geographies: Journal of Studies and Research in Human Geography*, 9 (1), pp. 97-107.
- O'Reilly, K. (2022) Migration Theories: A Critical Overview. In: A. Triandafyllidou (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*. Second edition. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 3-12.
- Oestreich, K. F. (2016) 'Orlando about the Year 1840': Woolf's Rebellion against Victorian Sexual Repression through Image and Text. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 12 (1), pp. 1-19.
- Ong, A. (2003) *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Osborne, B. S. (2001) Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in its Place. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 33 (3), pp. 39-77.

- Palumbo, L. and Marchetti, S. (2024) Country Report. The legal and policy infrastructure of irregularity: Italy. *I-CLAIM*, pp. 1-49.
- Pamment, C. (2010) Hijraism: Jostling for a Third Space in Pakistani Politics. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 54 (2), pp. 29-50.
- Pamment, C. (2012) A Split Discourse: Body Politics in Pakistan's Popular Punjabi Theatre. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 56 (1), pp. 114-127.
- Pamment, C. (2019) The *Hijra* Clap in Neoliberal Hands: Performing Trans Rights in Pakistan. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 63 (1), pp. 141-151.
- Parker, C., Scott, S. and Geddes, A., (2019) Snowball Sampling. In: P. Atkinson et al. (eds.) *Sage Research Methods Foundations*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Parker, R. (1997) Migration, Sexual Subcultures, and HIV/AIDS in Brazil. In: G. Herdt (ed.) *Sexual Cultures and Migration in the Era of AIDS*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 55-69.
- Parla, A. (2017) Precarious Hope, Migrant Legalization, and the Limits of Affect Theory. *The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science*, 58, pp. 1-18.
- Parla, A. (2019) *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pérez Murcia, L. E. and Boccagni, P. (2022) Do Objects (Re)produce Home among International Migrants?. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43 (5), pp. 589-605.
- Pettit, H. and Ruijtenberg, W. (2019) Migration as Hope and Depression: Existential Im/mobilities In and Beyond Egypt. *Mobilities*, 14 (5), pp. 730-744.
- Pinelli, B. (2017) Borders, Politics and Subjects. Introductory Notes on Refugee Research in Europe. *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 10 (1), pp. 5-24.
- Pink, S. (2001) *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Pink, S. (2015) *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Second Edition. London: SAGE Publications.
- Plummer, P. and Kazmi, S. K. A. (2021) "Transgendered, castrated, effeminate"? Gender and Ambiguity in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Journal Netzwerk Frauen-und Geschlechterforschung*, 49, pp. 74-80.
- Polizia di Stato (2024) *Permesso di soggiorno UE per soggiornanti di lungo periodo* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/permesso-di-soggiorno-ue-per-soggiornanti-di-lungo-periodo.--carta-di-soggiorno-per-cittadini-stranieri> [Accessed: 09/01/2026].
- Pompeo, F. (ed.) (2011) *Pigneto-banglatown. Migrazioni e conflitti di cittadinanza in una periferia storica romana*. Roma: Meti Edizioni.

- Poole, D. (2005) An Excess of Description: Ethnography, Race, and Visual Technologies. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 159-179.
- Popolla, M. (2021) Hotspots. Pratiche produttive, artistiche e di militanza nei luoghi della sessualità in Italia. *Italian Studies in Southern Africa/Studi d'Italianistica nell'Africa Australe*, 34 (2), pp. 129-150.
- Prearo, M. (2020) Stato, politica e morale dell'asilo LGBTI. In: N. Martorano and M. Prearo (eds.) *Migranti LBGTI. Pratiche, politiche e contesti di accoglienza*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, pp. 43-69.
- Pretorius, L. and Patel, S. V. (2025) What's in a Name? Participants' Pseudonym Choices as a Practice of Empowerment and Epistemic Justice. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 48 (4), pp. 371-388.
- Prieto-Blanco, P. (2021) Afterword: Visual Research in Migration: (In)Visibilities, Participation, Discourses. In: K. Nikielska-Sekula and A. Desille (eds.) *Visual Methodology in Migration Studies: New Possibilities, Theoretical Implications, and Ethical Questions*. Cham: Springer, pp. 327-343.
- Priori, A. (2010) Vita segreta delle 'etnie'. Politica e stratificazione sociale a Banglatown. *Zapruder. Rivista di Storia della Conflittualità Sociale*, 22, pp. 38-54.
- Priori, A. (2012a) *Romer probashira. Reti sociali e itinerari transnazionali bangladesi a Roma*. Roma: Meti Edizioni.
- Priori, A. (2012b) Murghi, patron e padroni. Speculazione, esclusione sociale e differenza culturale fra i migranti bangladesi a Roma. In: F. Pompeo (ed.) *Paesaggi dell'Esclusione*. Torino: UTET.
- Priori, A. (2014) La difesa dello spazio. Le aggressioni ai bangladesi in un quartiere della periferia romana. *Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali*, 110, pp. 95-114.
- Priori, A. (2017) Bangladeshi Multi-Scalar Im/mobilities: Between Social Aspirations and Legal Obstacles. *New Diversities*, 19 (3), pp. 29-42.
- Priori, A. (2019) Soggetti al potere/soggetti di potere. Im/mobilità multiscalarì bangladesi fra coercizione e agency. In: B. Riccio (ed.) *Mobilità. Incursioni etnografiche*. Milano: Mondadori, pp. 178-210.
- Priori, A., Mapril, J. and Della Puppa, F. (2021) Banglascapes in Southern Europe: Im-mobilities, Emplacements, Temporalities. *Migration Letters*, 18 (1), pp. 1-11.
- Prosser, J. (1998) *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Puar, J. K. (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Puar, J. K. (2008) 'The Turban Is Not a Hat': Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling. *Sikh Formations*, 4 (1), pp. 47-91.

- Raghuram, P., Breines, M.R. and Gunter, A. (2024) De-Migranticizing as Methodology: Rethinking Migration Studies through Immobility and Liminality. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12 (1), pp. 1-20.
- Rahman, M. (2014) *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rahman, M. M. and Kabir, M. A. (2012) Bangladeshi Migration to Italy: The Family Perspective. *Asia Europe Journal*, 10 (4), pp. 251-265.
- Rao, R. (2020) *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Recchi, E. (2015) *Mobile Europe: The Theory and Practice of Free Movement in the EU*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reddy, G. (2005) *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Reddy, G. (2019) Hijras. In: H. Chiang, H. and A. Arondekar (eds.) *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History*. Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner and Sons, pp. 666-670.
- Regalia, C. and Giuliani, C. (eds.) (2012) *Esperienze di donne nella migrazione araba e pakistana*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Richmond, A. H. (1993) Reactive Migration: Sociological Perspectives on Refugee Movements. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6 (1), pp. 7-24.
- Rodríguez, J. M. (2014) *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York, London: New York University Press.
- Rosati, F. et al. (2021) Experiences of Life and Intersectionality of Transgender Refugees Living in Italy: A Qualitative Approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (23), pp. 1-15.
- Rose, G. (1997) Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 21 (3), pp. 305-320.
- Rossi, A. (ed.) (2025) *Report Gay Help Line 2025. Il secondo livello del servizio: dati sulle consulenze e prese in carico* [Online]. Available at: <https://gayhelpline.it/report-gay-help-line/> [Accessed: 14/07/2025].
- Roy, J. (2015) The “Dancing Queens”: Negotiating Hijra Pehchan from India’s Streets onto the Global Stage. *Ethnomusicology Review*, 20, pp. 1-23.
- Roy, J. (2016) Translating Hijra into Transgender Performance and Pehchān in India’s Trans-Hijra Communities. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3 (3-4), pp. 412-432.

- Roy, J. (2023) Explorations in Sonic Creation: Feeling Elsewhere through Sincerely Queer Listening. *Feminist Review*, 133, pp. 96-100.
- Roy, N. and Verdun, A. (2019) Bangladeshi Migrants of Italy and Their Precarity. *Social Sciences*, 8 (4), p. 123.
- Rutakumwa, R. et al. (2020) Conducting In-Depth Interviews with and without Voice Recorders: A Comparative Analysis. *Qualitative Research*, 20 (5), pp. 565-581.
- Salazar, N. B. (2019) Mobility. *REMHU*, 27 (57), pp. 13-24.
- Sand, A., H. Skovbjerg and L. Tanggaard (2022) Re-thinking Research Interview Methods through the Multisensory Constitution of Place. *Qualitative Research*, 22 (4), pp. 594-612.
- Sanò, G. and Della Puppa, F. (2021) The Multiple Facets of (Im)mobility: A Multisited Ethnography on Territorialisation Experiences and Mobility Trajectories of Asylum Seekers and Refugees Outside the Italian Reception System. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26 (5), pp. 552-568
- Saria, V. (2021) *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Schapendonk, J. and Steel, G. (2014) Following Migrant Trajectories: The Im/ Mobility of Sub-Saharan Africans En Route to the European Union. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 194 (2), pp. 262-270.
- Schinker, W. (2018) Against 'Immigrant Integration': For an End to Neocolonial Knowledge Production. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6 (31), pp. 1-17.
- Schuster, L. (2005) The Continuing Mobility of Migrants in Italy: Shifting between Places and Statuses. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, pp. 31 (4), pp. 757-774.
- Sciurba, A. (2018) Ai confini dei diritti. Richiedenti asilo tra normativa e prassi, dall'hotspot alla decisione della Commissione territoriale. *Questione Giustizia*, 2, pp. 145-157.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1994) How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys. In: (id.) *Tendencies*. London: Routledge.
- Sermijn, J., Devlieger, P. and Loots, G. (2008) The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as a Rhizomatic Story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14 (4), pp. 632-650.
- Shah, S. P. (2015) Queering Critiques of Neoliberalism in India: Urbanism and Inequality in the Era of Transnational "LGBTQ" Rights. *Antipode*, 47 (3), pp. 635-651.
- Shahani, N. (2019) Section 377 in South Asia. In: H. Chiang and A. Arondekar (eds.) *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer History*. Farmington Hills: Charles Scribner and Sons, pp. 1424-1427.

- Shambu, G. (2019) For a New Cinephilia. *Film Quarterly*, 72 (3), pp. 32-34.
- Shambu, G. (2020) *The New Cinephilia*. Second edition. Montreal: caboose.
- Sharma, S. (2018) *Muratan, Mahants and Emergent Identities: Vernacular Culture and the Power of Place in Transgender Punjab*. Unpublished Master of Research Thesis. Macquarie University.
- Sheller, M. and Urry, J. (2006) The New Mobilities Paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38 (2), pp. 207-226.
- Siddiqi, D. M. (2009) *Summary Report: To Act or No to Act? Section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code*. Dhaka: James P Grant School of Public Health.
- Siddiqi, D. M. (2011) Sexuality, Rights and Personhood: Tensions in a Transnational World. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 11 (3), pp. 1-11.
- Siddiqi, D. M. (2019) Exceptional Sexuality in a Time of Terror: “Muslim” Subjects and Dissenting/Unmournable Bodies. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 20, pp. 1-17.
- Sinclair-Palm, J. (2017) “It’s non-existent”: Haunting in Trans Youth Narratives about Naming. *Occasional Paper Series*, 37, pp. 1-13.
- Sircar, O. (2017) New Queer Politics in the New India: Notes on Failure and Stuckness in a Negative Moment. *Unbound: Harvard Journal of the Legal Left*, 11 (1), pp. 1-36.
- Small, M. L. (2009) ‘How Many Cases do I Need?’ On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research. *Ethnography*, 10 (1), pp. 5-38.
- Sontag, S. (2005) *On Photography*. First edition 1973. New York: RosettaBooks.
- Sorgoni, B. (2022) *Antropologia delle migrazioni. L’età dei rifugiati*. Roma: Carocci editore.
- Spijkerboer, T. (ed.) (2013) *Fleeing Homophobia: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Asylum*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Srinivasam, A. (2022) *The Right to Sex*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stryker, S. (2023) *Storia transgender. Radici di una rivoluzione*. Roma: LUISS University Press.
- Svašek, M. (ed.) (2012) *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Swain, J. and King, B. (2022). Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, pp. 1-10.
- Syeda, F. B. (2015) *New Media, Masculinity and Mujra Dance in Pakistan*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London.
- Taylor, Y. (2007) *Working Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taylor, Y., Hines, S. and Casey, M. (eds.) (2010) *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*. Cham: Springer.

- Tellis, A. (2012) Disrupting the Dinner Table: Re-thinking the 'Queer Movement' in Contemporary India. *Jindal Global Law Review*, 4 (1), pp. 142-156.
- Thapan, M. (2013) *Isolation, Uncertainty and Change: Indian Immigrant Women and the Family in Northern Italy*. CARIM-India RR, 2013/09. San Domenico di Fiesole: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.
- Thapan, M. (2015) Punjabi Youth in Northern Italy: The Family, Belonging and Freedom. In: K. A. Jacobsen and K. Myrvold (eds.) *Young Sikhs in a Global World: Negotiating Traditions, Identities and Authorities*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 51-70.
- Tian, I. L. et al. (2020) Living Peripheral, Thinking South: Decolonising Queer Marxism, or, Why Does Queer Marxism need Asia? Part 1. *Invert Journal*, pp. 36-46.
- Ticktin, M. (2011) *Casualties of Carre: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press.
- Tobin, J. (2012) Assessing GLBTI Refugee Claims: Using Human Rights Law to Shift the Narrative of Persecution within Refugee Law. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, 44, pp. 447-484.
- Toso, F. (2021) Domande di protezione internazionale fondate sull'orientamento sessuale, identità di genere, espressione di genere e caratteristiche sessuali. In: C. Ferrara et al. (eds.) *I have a dream: studi e strumenti per il lavoro con migranti LGBTI*. Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, pp. 29-44.
- Triulzi, A. (2020) Archiviare il presente. L'autonarrazione dei migranti come fonte. In: D. Salerno, e P. Violi (eds.) *Stranieri nel ricordo. Verso una memoria pubblica delle migrazioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 41-62.
- Ullah, A. A. and Azizuddin, M. (2018) South Asian Student Migration to Nordic Countries: Changing Initial Motivations. *Asian Profile*, 46 (1), pp. 73-87.
- Urry, J. (2007) *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Valentine, D. (2004). The Categories Themselves. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2), pp. 215-220.
- Valentine, D. (2007) *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Van Auken, P. M., Frisvoll, S. J. and Stewart, S. I. (2010) Visualising Community: Using Participant-Driven Photo-Elicitation for Research and Application. *Local Environment*, 15 (4), pp. 373-388.
- Vartabedian, J. (2018) *Brazilian 'Travesti' Migrations: Gender, Sexualities and Embodiment Experiences*. Cham: Springer.
- Vanita, R. and Kidwai, S. (2001) *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*. New York: Palgrave.

- Vertovec, S. (2007) Super-Diversity and Its Implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30 (6), pp. 1024-1054.
- Vesce, C. (2021) Politiche di genere e pratiche dell'accoglienza. Etnografia della presa in carico di richiedenti e rifugiati trans a Bologna. In: C. Ferrara et al. (eds.) *I have a dream: studi e strumenti per il lavoro con migranti LGBTI*. Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, pp. 75-83.
- Vianelli, L., Gill, N. and Hoellerer, N. (2022) Waiting as Probation: Selecting Self-Disciplining Asylum Seekers. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48 (5), pp. 1013-1032.
- Warner, M. (ed.) (1993) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Warren, C. A. B. et al. (2003). After the Interview. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26 (1), pp. 93-110
- Weeks, J. (1986) *Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wessels, J. (2011) *Sexual Orientation in Refugee Status Determination*. Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper Series no. 74, Oxford Department of International Development.
- Weston, K. (1995) Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2 (3), pp. 253-277.
- Wiegman, R. and Wilson, E. A. (2015) Queer Theory without Antinormativity. *differences*, 26 (1), pp. 1-25.
- Wimmer, A. and Glick Schiller, N. (2002) Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences. *Global Networks*, 2 (4), pp. 301-334.
- Yip, A. K. T. (2018) Coming Home from the Wilderness: An Overview of Recent Scholarly Research in LGBTQI Religiosity/Spirituality in the West. In K. Browne, S. R. Munt and A. K. T. Yip (eds.) *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Spaces*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 35-50.
- Zetter, R. (2015) *Protection in Crisis: Forced Migration in a Global Era*. Washington: Migration Policy Institute.
- Zimman, L. and Hall, K. (2009) Language, Embodiment and the 'Third Sex.' In: C. Llamas and D. Watt (eds.) *Language and Identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 166-178.
- Zwicky, J. (2021) Show, Don't Tell. *Theoria*, 87, pp. 897-912.
- Zahed, L. M. (2020) *Homosexuality, Transidentity, and Islam: A Study of Scripture Confronting the Politics of Gender and Sexuality*. Translated by A. S. Bharat. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.