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Guest Editors
Monica Bernardi
Luca Bottini

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Ismail Oubad, Khalid Mouna[1]
Certifying Credibility:
Trajectory of Sub-Saharan asylum seekers in Italy[2]

Introduction

In the last decade, migrants arriving in Europe for asylum have occupied the threads of discourse on immigration. Amid the so-called «Europe's refugee and migrant crisis» protection seekers' quest to legal protection has been activated under an increasing enactment of border regimes (Artero and Fontnari, 2019), migration-control-policies (Hess and Kasparek, 2017) and immigration law enforcement (Hess and Petrogiannis, 2020). Hindrances of border control, push backs and the tightening of asylum procedures have become the norm of EU's approach «against the abuse of its asylum system» (Agenda on Migration 2015). Today, with the ongoing implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, asylum determination is increasingly problematic; it calls into question tensions between the governance of migration and practices of protection seekers.

While a large line of scholarship has underscored the tensions between the governance of migration, bureaucracy and street-level practices (e.g. Griffiths, 2014; Schapendonk, 2017; Artero and Fontanari, 2019), asylum determination procedures were little developed (Gill and Good, 2018). The deficiency in research on the dynamics shaping asylum determination exposed the lack of capture of asylum policies *in action* and the role potentially played by asylum seekers within the asylum labyrinth. Attempting to fill this gap, recent studies have examined processes of decision-making in the European asylum determination system (e.g. Sbricolli and Jacovielli, 2011; Gill and Good, 2018; Kobelinsky, 2018; Gibb, 2018). This line of analysis has challenged the doctrinal apprehension of asylum determination procedures as fundamentally animated by the right and the law. It has shown ways in which asylum procedures are strongly grounded in certain social and political contexts, underscoring thus ways actors involved act and reshape the course of the procedures. Notwithstanding the relevance of the existing research, the experience of asylum seekers through procedures of determination is under-researched, often compensated by the narratives and practices of the formal actors (administrators, judges, lawyers, case-workers, etc.). Again, asylum seekers were depicted as 'passive' victims, shaped by the power of asylum procedures' control. This representation incorporates losing touch with a growing reality on asylum determination practices: migrants' ability in conveying and certifying their eligibility to protection in arrival countries. To go along with Gandolfi, "we intend here to consider in particular the dynamics of asylum seeker flows as one of the relata that has specifically marked recent migration dynamics in Italy and Europe from post-2011 to adj"(Gandolfi, 2018: 13).

In this paper, we argue that asylum determination procedures are not evident and unidirectional; they rather comprise diverse forms of credibility certification upon the substantive interview. Here, the emphasis is made on ways credibility assessments in the substantive interview are experienced, negotiated and certified by Sub-Saharan protection seekers. We study migrants' practices by highlighting different situations in which migrants are coerced to produce certifications of their vulnerability. The proofs provided by the protection seekers might be fabricated, factual or fantastical ; however, they are inscribed in realities and a world, and they offer the possibility of resisting exclusionary practices of asylum determination procedures.

Fieldwork:

The fieldwork was carried from October 2019 to June 2021. This period can be split into two moments parts: the first consists of staying immersivity fully immersed in Mestre, and residing there. This allowed shaping the everyday activities of one of the authors along the line of his encounters with the interlocutors. The other author privileged expeditive visits to stimulate an external vision and nuance the immersion of the other researcher. By doing so, sight was gained of ways our personal world can merge with that of the subjects and ways we can mitigate risks of emotional immersion. Be that as it may, the second period was marked by the first national lockdown in Italy. This has implied the compliance with confinement guidelines. Despite that, the empirical research was ongoingly conducted by one of the authors. It required an adjustment of research tools and methodologies. While before testimonies were collected through face-to-face interactions, at that moment we will rely on phone interviews through secured end-to-end encrypted channels. In fact, this virtual interaction has influenced the density and the spontaneity of the exchange. Many conversations were hindered by the expression "*when we meet in person, I will tell you more about that*". In this setting conversations will be directed more towards the various legal statuses each interlocutor has acquired and lived experiences after the abolishment of the humanitarian protection with the Legislative Decree 113/2018 (which makes the subject of another forthcoming article). With the lifting of the national lockdown by the mid May 2020, encounters with the interlocutors will be again possible. Here, one of the authors will carry two more months of fieldwork and collection of testimonies and anecdotes on ways legal statuses were acquired and also ways they were lost.

In both cases, data collection revolved around testimonies and anecdotes accounting paths crossed by Sub-Saharan protection seekers coming from the so-called 'safe' countries of origin when encountering asylum determination procedures. One of the themes emerged was they learned to tell their stories of persecution to covey eligibility to protection. Access to interlocutors was built on referral sampling. Ten biographical interviews were conducted with migrants from Nigeria, Sudan, Gambia, and Senegal who landed in Italy after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and were channeled to apply for asylum. The sum of information came from a very specific group of migrants; those denied asylum at the first claim. The insights gathered were very useful to understanding the experience of certifying one's credibility to legal protection upon asylum determination procedures.

For one of the authors, when arrived in Venice, it was quite difficult to find private accommodation in the historical center while being new-comer and holder of a Moroccan passport. He was left with the option to live in the peripheral city of Mestre, where many migrants reside. He ended up residing in Via Piave, Mestre, a neighborhood known for the presence of the Sub-Saharian migrant population. That is how he got to meet many people from Sub-Saharan Africa in bars and parks of the neighborhood.

He was introduced to C., the interpreter, by another informant. This person has worked in Italy, for a long period, with several Territorial Commissions as an interpreter from French, Arabic, and Kurdish to Italian. He himself is an established refugee from Iran. The authors have managed to weave contact with two legal operators, D., and L.,. They were law students in the university of Venice and politically engaged in a pro-migrant collective assisting asylum seekers in the Region of Veneto. Through them we managed to meet a former case-officer who used to conduct the asylum hearing interviews in the region of Sicily.

S., a 43-year-old Nigerian male, that we met in a birthday party of a Nigerian woman at AD hostel in Mestre. Around a cigarette in the garden, we got to know each other. As the author declared Moroccan, S., curiously asked about when and how he arrived in Italy. A student, he presented himself, who is in Venice and interested in knowing about the problems faced by migrants in Italy. S. miled and said: "you *are African, you don't know them?*". Through the course of our conversation, we talked about being (ir)regular, asylum seeker, and ordeals linked to these situations. S. would say: "*I am legal here in Italy, but before being this I had to do a lot of things brother, problems... problems as you arrive*".

The coincidence of the encounter has provided a proximity of being "the African who should know about these problems". This positionality has established a sort of proximity that goes beyond the usual distance between the researcher and the researched – at least in the eyes of S. We established a space for co-producing narratives on our experience with the immigration bureaucracy in Italy despite our different migratory trajectories.

We would meet S., regularly, after work, we would go to a bar where "African brothers" (as he called them) gather. Being introduced to his friends as the Moroccan student who just arrived in Mestre has allowed me to know more people who arrived in Italy upon Emergency North Africa, who were denied protection and who appealed to challenge the denial of their claim of legal protection.

Investigating a vulnerable population is not an easy endeavor; it requires attentive modalities of access and integration into the migrants' community (O'Reilly, 2009). During the first two months, the priority was to spend time and socialize with people from Sub-Saharan Africa. As Africans ourselves and being visibly 'non-European outsiders', we claimed our African identity. This allowed us to build a certain proximity with our interlocutors. Being migrants in Europe has opened rich perspectives in terms of proximity and exchange with our respondents. In this situation, proximity is a variability, which can be cultural, geographical, or through the migratory experience. This might go against a classical anthropological approach that preaches distance as a form of objectification. In fact, our proximity was not emotional, it is rather expressed in terms of codes and references shared with our interlocutors, which facilitates the understanding of both the cognitive and the pragmatic logics of their migratory trajectories. The stay in the field was not here regulated by some professional norms (expeditive, time-line, extractive), it was rather an immersion in a space of everyday life and encounters. This ethnographic *démarche* allowed us to identify six subjects with whom we conducted in-depth biographical interviews to restitute their experience in dealing with asylum determination procedures. Restituting testimonies have resulted in tracing actors gravitating around the asylum determination procedure.

People we met would tell me stories of how they managed to deal with the denial of their claim to legal protection when arrived to Italy. By telling their stories, they would also testify on case-officers, interpreters in asylum hearing setting and on lawyer that facilitated and/or constrained their quest to legal protection. Thus, we identified the actors gravitating around the asylum determination and credibility assessment through their testimonies and meet these "knowers" of the occurrences accounted.

A., a Gambian male and one of the protagonists of this research, will become our second informer. Punctual encounters in cafés will become frequent in X park and sometimes in our house. Proximity allowed a dense discussion around the experiences of access to legal statuses of protection. Shadowing A. allowed encountering other migrants who willingly narrated their experiences. Being allowed to narrate what is important to them, while being actively heard and assisted to put their experience into expressions brought about some level of trust, and therefore going beyond the rigid protocols of interviewing. Respondents were informed that their statements would be used for fundamental research and might be publicly available for journal publications. By being seen as an "African brother", we managed to enter the everydayness of the people I encountered. Being there, not inhabited by the extractive urge **to** know about people's privacy, has allowed us to be seen as allies. Entering the realm of their anthropological 'truth',(to be deleted) was possible due to the proximity of origin, the fact that we share bureaucratic ordeals with the immigration system in Italy, but also the non-extractive posture of being there and allowing their words to unfold without forcing it into the rigid protocol of the interview and the expeditive research. Therefore, instead of building a model around Sub-Saharan migration, we have sought to explore the experiential dimension of the migratory journey and underscore the meanings allocated to contexts encountered by migrants themselves, and how they navigate and situate themselves vis-à-vis the continuum of constraints and facilitations. Hence drawing on a collaborative, embodied, critical and engaged *performance and imagi-*

nation, (Kazubowski-Houston *et al*. 2018) in constructing the respondents' personal testimonies. It is important to underline that the data was collected on the basis of a dialogical attitude with the interlocutors met. We would look at anecdotical occurrences, experiences and ways we dealt with constraints. We privileged the density of the anecdotes, and of the events they were involved in. On top of that, collecting testimonies through personal accounts helped to understand not only what is happening but also the reasons behind what happened. Building of dialogues allows sensitivity to the logics, both cognitive and pragmatic, behind the structured life-stories that are often oriented towards specific assumed events. In fact, the testimonies were analyzed and sorted in many themes: (1) (re)shipment of credibility; (2) encounters with facilitators; (3) navigation of asylum determination procedures; (4) legal statuses mobility, etc. For the concern of this article, the data from which our argument has transpired was analyzed with the aim of the following ways: (re)shipment of credibility shifts, its locations and the way it transforms depending on encounters with peer-migrants and other allies. Evidently, the interlocutors have a lot to tell us, and for the researcher it is an opportunity to develop a hermeneutic of practices (Bourdieu, 1977: 1) and therefor restitute an approximate image of how credibility is acquired, circulates across spaces and shapes protection seekers' access to legal status. The analysis of these testimonies passed first through the restitution of lived experiences, and then considered the subjective dimension of the narrative. We avoided resorting to the somewhat enigmatic concepts and over-interpretations. Rather we allowed the testimonies to (re)organize to give an image on how access to legal status of protection is shaped in this case. The interest was to guarantee the testimonies produced indicate something of the "reference reality" (Cf. Olivier de Sardan, 2008) and without urging to some excessive over-representations and generalization. An agreement was made on changing their names and the names of places in our ethnographic notes. However, four interlocutors sharing their personal stories was neither a matter of evidence nor empty of meaning and interest. Their interest in telling their personal stories sometimes had a denunciation-like agenda; some interlocutors demanded to make visible their precarious legal situation. As O., said, «Europe is not the Promised Land for refugees; people must know what refugees, even those with documents, live in Europe». In other cases, narrating one's story was often animated by an advice-related interest; the expression «do you think I made the right move? » comes more often during the exchange with the interlocutors. The time when the fieldwork was conducted is marked by legal intricacies for refugees in Italy. After the legislation of Security and Immigration Decree 2018 abolished the humanitarian protection, refugees coming from the so-called 'safe' countries of origin have faced several bureaucratic constraints and withdrawal of the legal protection they were granted previously. Several interlocutors did ask for information about the *Questura*, the current asylum procedures and the practices of bureaucrats. Additionally, as Sub-Saharan migrants have occupied the threads of discourse on migration to Europe in recent years, it is common for migrants to be approached by academic researchers and journalists aiming at reporting their situations. Ab., depicts, «you will always have someone coming to you asking you about your life, just because you are black [...] every time, journalists ask you about how you live... I tell them you want my story... then pay me for my time».

Integrating the migrants' community and broadening the relationship not only offer an advantage to understand how different people can justify themselves individually, but also made visible individual paths of the subjects' situation, the production and fabrication of the trials of legalism of one's path and of one's singular suffering, as can be incorporated as a reference to very general forms of justice.

Governing the 'unwanted': from 'threat' to 'victims' and back

The uprisings occurred from the year 2011 have influenced the governance of migration and border control between the Southern and the Northern shores of the Mediterranean. These

events are interpreted as the 'crisis' of the European border regime (Campesi, 2011). The fall of Gaddafi and Ben Ali regimes provoked an important number of people landing on the Southern Italian coast, principally on Lampedusa. In official discourses, arrivals of migrants were seen as an emergency and a conquest by the south. The images circulating in the media of Italy have structured public opinion, but have also fed anti-migration reactions, images and videos that have become an argument for populist parties in Europe in general.

Considering its position as a front-line EU member state, Italy, has established the Emergency North Africa program (ENA). Arrivals of protection seekers at that time were framed into a blurry governing response both in discourses and policies: they were subjects of 'compassion' when treated as helpless subjects and victims, as well as a threat to the national order under the frame of the fight against illegal immigration (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). On this basis, asylum claims were structured as an issue of security and a problem of public order: the main duty of the asylum administration, then, was to defend the security of its territory by identifying those perceived as counterfeit protection seekers, rather than ensuring access to asylum rights. To compromise with the principle of *non-refoulement*, in the best-case scenario, the territorial Commissions[3] have issued temporary protection (i.e. humanitarian protection) to those deemed as 'victims' of war. The complexity of this context calls into question both the practices of asylum determination as well as the ways in which protection seekers navigate the administrative environment governing their cases. Thus, we ask: how have asylum seekers framed as counterfeit navigated the asylum administrations and certified their eligibility to legal statuses of protection?

Credibility assessment: which is which and who is who?

In Italy migration is governed by the Bossi-Fini law of 2002 (Lalli *et al*, 2022). Under this law, the legal status of an immigrant is subordinated to the presentation of a regular work contract, which leads to a fluctuation in the legal status of migrants. As a result, the loss of status can occur at any moment of economic crisis, for which migrants are the first to pay the price, «in 2009 the so-called 'Security Packet' furthered this apparently tough stance on immigration. The bill included a dramatic rise in the cost of permit renewal, and it made the status of 'illegality' a crime» (Tuckett, 2015: 115-116). Given the difficulty of accessing legal statuses, migrants arriving in Italy, either fleeing wars or escaping disastrous political and economic conditions in their country had to cross the asylum channel and certify their suffering and eligibility for protection.

For protection seekers who landed alive on the Italian shores, asylum determination procedures have always been problematic, especially when they cannot provide other types of material evidence (e.g. documenting persecution lived) in certifying their ordeals of persecution (Coffey, 2003; Sorgoni, 2019). Classified by countries of origin (safe country of origin[4] or in calamity country of origin) and type of lived ordeals, less consideration is attributed to individual cases. Nowadays, in the Italian asylum system, lack of credibility is an often-used motive for the rejection of protection seekers' claim upon asylum determination procedures (Asilo in Europa, 2020).

After their journey through the Mediterranean Sea, protection seekers are rearranged in camps and centers to be identified, registered, and channeled to asylum determination procedures. The asylum labyrinth commences, and protection seekers have to certify their fears of persecution to the agents of the administrative bodies in charge of the examination of their asylum stories. By exploring the testimonies of interlocutors, uncertainty and lack of information on asylum procedures have been underscored. As narrated by O.,.

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3   In Italy, Territorial Commissions are administrative bodies in charge the first extended interview and the first decision on international protection.
4   In the EU asylum Directives, a 'safe country of origin' is defined on the basis of the current legal system and the general political situation in the asylum seekers' country of origin. A country is considered safe if there is no war nor acts of persecution nor torture or other forms of inhuman punishment are visibly deployed. In 2018, with the so-called Salvini/Security law, Italy adopted its list of "safe country of origin'.

"In the beginning we were many, all in the camp. I had no idea about what will happen to me [...] you know, I spent a long time there. One day they sent me to do the [substantive] interview... They ask you to speak about your life ... I was confused. I did not know where to start or what to say... I knew that every wrong word will influence my life"
(O., a Nigerian male 8 years in Italy, temporary protection of one year, renewable. Marghera, December 2019)

On the same line B., brings to attention issues of (mis)communication and interpretation during the substantive interview. He explained:

"When I was telling them [agents of the commission] my story, we seemed to not really understand each other. The interpreter was not saying my words correctly... I could not complain at that time... They were interpreting what they wanted [...] I said to myself 'asking for protection in this country without knowing the language is like being in a cave searching for treasure without firelight in your hand' [...] You see, they did not trust me and I had no lawyer... so my story was denied".
(B., a Gambian male 7 years in Italy, subsidiary protection of five years, renewable. Mestre, May 2020)

Testimonies of the interlocutors have informed on ways they experience the interview for asylum determination. They had to tell their stories of suffering and helplessness in order to be deemed as eligible to the legal protection, or as 'counterfeit' applicants abusing the asylum system. In this situation, protection seekers have had no other medium to certify their suffering besides narratives on ordeals lived. The ordeals of communication, interpretation and lack of information appear as salient elements influencing the course of their asylum determination procedures in this stage.
Our aim to nuance testimonies on the practices in the substantive interview has directed the gaze to official actors of asylum determination as well. D., a caseworker operating with an Italian Territorial Commission, whose task was to conduct case-interviews and then report whether the case in question met the guidelines on credibility assessment or not, has testified on aspects of their examination exercise during the substantive interview. He clarifies.

"In the interviews we need to follow guidelines and evaluate if the applicants in front of me fits inside the guidelines [...]. Sometimes I feel like they are telling me the right story, but they are not telling me the right things that fit into the guidelines. When I feel that the claimant tells a coherent story, I ask further questions, rephrase what they say in the right way and ask for the applicants' validation to what I propose [...]. When the claimant is incoherent, I do not do so [...]. I do this to help truthful people to say their stories in the right way."
(D., an Italian Ex- case officer who operated from 2011 to 2015 Venice, January 2020)

D.'s testimony triggers questions about ways in which caseworkers enact their own understanding of coherency, thus shaping the setting of asylum storytelling. As he presents it, protection claimants judged 'truthful' are subject to guidance through story-generating questions and paraphrasing, while those who are not seen as such are left on their own. To him, this type of assistance must be provided to help those who have shown a certain degree of credibility so that they can fit into the credibility assessment guidelines in force. Daniele's testimonies allow us to gain insight into the ways in which evaluators can rely on their subjectivity in sorting 'trustworthy' versus 'counterfeits' claimants.
By referring to the EU asylum procedure directives, D mention two types of coherence that asylum seekers must meet:
1) Internal coherence which consists of a) sufficiency and specificity of the details; b) internal consistency and the verbal facts of the applicant; c) applicant's behavior and plausibility.
2) External coherence which resides in a) consistency with the specific and general information available by international reports; b) Plausibility of the narratives of the applicants in a given context. All in all, he insisted that the chronology of events that protection seekers offer, the modalities of narration, and the severity of their portrayed sufferance are important elements for the credibility assessment during the substantive interview. Thus, the caseworker concluded saying:

"*In our work, a lot of people will come to you claiming to be victims and refugees. Your job is to tell which is which and who is who [...] at the time of emergenza nord africa we had a lot of applications [...] when you have too much people to examine sometimes you skip some protocols, because simply you cannot evaluate that amount of people according to the guidelines*".
(D., an Italian, Ex- case officer who operated from 2011 to 2015 Venice, January 2020)

The occurrences described above coincide with findings of anthropologists who have examined the same setting. As Sbricolli and Jacovielli (2011) have underscored, the asylum hearing « imply a dialogue between narratives of persecutions and normative and political expectations of the decision-making authority, asylum is (...) a process through which the subject's identity is constituted (...) in relation to a legal and political framework to which the applicant is forced to adhere, and thus forming a new state of the world through adjusted narratives » (Sbricolli and Jacovie, 2011: 187).

On the flip side, the totality of the refugees encountered in this research was denied protection on their first attempt. The official reasons given were « lack of credibility » and « abuse of the asylum channels », leaving them in the limbo of illegality (Cabot, 2012: 16). When the judgment took place and their cases were denied, protection seekers sought assistance to appeal and challenge the denial judgment on their claims of protection. The subjects we interviewed were not passive regarding the denial of their claims. They have engaged in a quest to restore, rearrange, and resume their personal story of persecution through gaining information on the constitutive definition of credibility in the Italian asylum procedures.

In the quest to restore credibility:

Once denied, some protection seekers engage in circulation, in the quest of assistance to challenge the denial of their claims to protection. While some of the interlocutors have left the reception centers seeking assistance and appeal for their cases, others remained at reception centers waiting for their cases to be processed by Territorial Commissions. In both cases, protection seekers have built on encounters that have provided them with information on the Italian asylum bureaucracy and they have found some assistance to appeal their cases. Protection seekers often refer to the capability of other refugees, migrants, social assistants, and even asylum seekers sharing their situation to inform about key information, routes to follow, and cities to move to in order to gain assistance. These actors are conceptualized here as *bearers of information, they* can be anyone who can help protection seeker, in different ways, to access to legal assistance, adjust the narrative of persecution, match their story with the criteria of the constitutive apprehension of credibility assessment in force and therefore acquire an interstice in the channels of legal protection.
In the case of B., he abandoned the center seeking a 'better' place to apply for asylum. Denied in Trento, he continued his quest moving around cities. He ended up in Ventimiglia, at the Italian-French borders. He managed to cross the border to France. Attempting to claim asylum in France he was deported back to Italy according to the Dublin regulation. He headed next to Torino where he found assistance to challenge the denial of his claims.

"*In Torino I found associations helping migrants and refugees; there, they accept refugees [...] after being here and there and everywhere... meeting other refugees on my way, I have learned a lot of things about how these people [asylum bureaucracy officers] work. I also knew where to go and where not [...]. I made lots of wrong calculations, but in 2014 I made a good case, they gave me humanitarian asylum [...] my story was strong.*"
(B., a Gambian male 7 years in Italy, Mestre, May 2020)

In his quest for credibility, B. sought assistance to challenge the denial judgment on his asylum claims. After two years circulating around two countries undocumented, he was granted a hu-

manitarian protection after making a 'good' case. He established contacts with asylum facilitators and gained orientation and information on the asylum bureaucracy, challenging thus the denial on his asylum case. Building on his testimonies, encounters with peer migrants, refugees and pro-migration associations can provide protection seekers with knowledge about circuits of circulations, bureaucratic procedures, and elasticity in implementation of the asylum law in force. His narrative allows us to gain insight on the hybridity of assistance he gained along the way; it was not limited to solidarity from formal actors in the asylum field (NGOs, lawyers, social-workers, etc.) it was also maneuvered among *migrants-bearers-of-information* (refugees, asylum seekers, interpreters, etc.). This type of assistance is not unique. It extends to other interlocutors deemed not 'sufficiently' compliant with the credibility criteria in force. As most of the interlocutors have informed, ways to certify one's persecutions and sufferance, circuits of circulation and assistance are a salient part of the exchanges among asylum seekers, their peer migrants and assistants. In this way, we can explain the choice of cities and region where illegalized migrants appeal the denial on their eligibility to protection. Words-of-mouth about the specific places where help, support and facilitation can be acquired are often conveyed through telling personal stories and feedback rather than institutional indications. There is always someone you know who has already gone through the procedure and may inform you about reliable ways to overcome illegality. With that being said, curiosity is raised on how these subjects « *make a good case* » as many have pointed?

"They need to hear a good story": from fragmentation to consistency

From what emerges from the collected testimonies, overcoming the credibility assessment and finding an interstice in the asylum legal channels can be materialized through delivering coherent narratives of sufferance and persecutions. These narratives are here seen as the medium to certify one's fear of persecutions and, to an extent, eligibility to legal protection.

While some anthropologists have argued that translators (Sorgoni, 2019) and lawyers (Sbricolli and Jacovielli, 2011) play an important role in the asylum hearing settings and influence the nature of the narratives provided by the protection seekers, producing thus a textualized subjectivity (Sbriccolli and Jacovielli, 2011), in which asylum seekers are deemed to be passive subjects losing control over their own history. We argue differently that in this process, some asylum claimants acquire a circumscribed control on their narratives of persecutions - particularly after their encounters with the "knowers" of techniques in conveying credibility - as they shape their own stories to fit into the practices in force. It is true that assessment of the narrative credibility is a complex procedure as it implies an unbalanced power relation where the subjectivity of heterogeneous actors (i.e. judges, case workers, interpreters, asylum claimants) is involved. However, basing the asylum determination decision on the credibility of narratives is not only productive for the judges of the Territorial Commission (Sorgoni, 2019: 167) - as they conclude cases in shorter time to meet the guidelines. It can be also productive for protection seekers when they are disposed of knowledge on how to tell a coherent story of persecution to meet the normative and the institutional expectations. The narrative credibility is actually a contested space by asylum claimants too. These subjects enact their circumscribed agency (Cabot, 2012) on the narratives and (re)shape it to gain an interstice in eligibility to protection. It is important to also consider the role of protection seekers in navigating their connections to gain information and knowledge on ways to present themselves upon the asylum hearing. Here, *bearers of information* and knowers of the asylum hearing setting appear to be a resource often accessible to some migrants to overcome the coercive practices of suspicion, institutional expectations and denial of eligibility to protection seekers coming from the so-called 'safe' countries of origin.

"Myself, O., B., and A.,, sitting in the bar in XY; the people are gathering to watch a football match scheduled at 19h45 [...] a man walks by and attracts A's attention. A., calls on the man ... Onwa is his name.

He was asking for a person called Adbbi. A., engage in a conversation with Onwa in Nigerian. After a few moments, Onwa went outside to talk with another person. After an exchange between O., and A., Ogbwa addressed me saying: 'you know why he came here? He received a second refusal, he was running after his papers for a while…' O., told me that Adbbi, the man sought by Onwa, is actually a person with good connections with lawyers and NGOs helping migrants. He explained how Adbbi knows everything about stories of asylum as he helped many people facing similar problems […] B., commented saying: when people arrive here, they do not know anything, but you find yourself with many brothers like you. Some arrive with a plan; they aim to go to places where they have their friends or their family and where Italians help migrants. Once here you start to know where to go and with whom to talk."
(Ethnography in a bar in Mestre, February 2020)

Following our quest to grasp ways the 'good' story is (re)shaped, we sought to encounter these "knowers" of the asylum hearing settings. In fact, people sharing such conditions or those who went through this before are brought together through a sense of a *shared and mobile common* (Trimikliniotis et al., 2022). Also, the social proximity is a key factor in the access to "knowers" and facilitators having at their disposal required information and knowledge to tell one's story of persecution.

"*You have to go through lots of problems and adventures, only then you start to know how they function (the asylum determination agents). In some part of this country, you are seen as dangerous to them, you are black! If you know where to go and if you are lucky, you can have asylum. Some will just tell you stories of something not real. You have to find your people those who want good for you. I met many that helped me to find a good lawyer that will help me and tell me what to do and what to say to the judge to have asylum (…). My story was strong. You know, it is an international law, if you have the political asylum; Italy is obliged to give you papers… I could speak Italian by then and say what I want. I really needed it in order to help myself and find people who can help me. I decided to stay here to have my papers, going to France or somewhere else was not a good idea, they will always send you back*.".
(D., a Senegalese male 9 years in Italy, Mestre, January 2020)

Indeed, the knowledge network function through words-of-mouth, which protection seekers encounter as they move. The first source of information about these nodes of facilitations and knowledge are always migrants themselves, settled refugees and their broader community. This is because it is easy to trust people you know. "Who to trust" is a crucial element in this dispersed infrastructure of information. Telling one's story go beyond the aim to covey eligibility to protection, it is also a function to the circulation of information deemed helpful to adjust one's path in the quest for protection.

To follow on the trajectory of (re)shaping and knowing how to tell a story of persecution, we discussed with an established refugee who operates as an interpreter with an Italian territorial Commission. He also provide informal assistance to protection seekers aiming at making their stories coherent and credible to the institutional expectations. This figure disposes of a fine knowledge of questions asked and evaluations depending on the country of origin.

"*I helped many people to tell a good story… I make their stories worth telling… if someone is lying, they (case officers and commission agents) can always know it. I know how the people of asylum work; I know their questions. They know the mentality of the refugee. They ask you like your mother. I did many interviews and I know what they ask according to each part of the world, I know that. Some will be asked about the war in Syria and the experience in the Balkans; some will be asked about Libya and Soudan and the Sahara. The rest is your story, focus on the details and do some cleaning of your story. And try again to tell it to yourself in front of a mirror. You have to believe it. After that, find a good city where there are not many asylum seekers and where the prefettura is doing good to the asylum seekers…*"
(F., an Iranian male 12 years in Italy, Marghera, May 2020)

During our discussions, F., would be advancing his practical experience with asylum interviews, F., considers that the core element shaping decisions on asylum requests resides in the way per-

secution stories are told. In a situation where the claimant disposes of no other form of certification, they are required to convey their fear of persecution through a personal story. F., assumes that when telling one's narrative of persecution in front of case-officers, protection seekers must adjust their stories beforehand. He said:

> "When people come to me, full of fear and confusion when they get a negative, asking me "do we need to get a lawyer?"; I recommend that they have to clean up their stories and make it more realistic, more real... you see... rather than going confused to a lawyer [...] lawyers do not always help you... sometimes lawyers receive instructions from the Commission asking them to report the false cases before they come to the interview [...] Some lawyers collaborate and they defend their countries from fake asylum seekers".
> (F., an Iranian male 12 years in Italy, Marghera, May 2020)

Frej, who is known in his community as an asylum-knower say that it is important to keep one's experience underground and discreet. Tensions between visibilizing and in-visibilizing knowledge at one's disposal are often used to keep opaque intentions and plans, which would often raise suspicion towards protection seekers. Frej's testimony on lawyers being instructed by agents of the Commission to report counterfeit asylum seekers points out that the mistrust and suspicion is a two-way process. As protection seekers are often mistrusted, migrants also suspect lawyers who are deemed to support asylum seekers claims against the Commission denial. In this case, migrants make a tactical decision not to trust some formal actors and rely more and more on their peers to minimize the likelihood of suspicion and thus the denial of their claims. Protection seekers must transform their lived experience into a consistent narrative of persecution, able to convey trustworthiness. Drawing on his knowledge of the EU asylum directives, F., emphasized further aspects to be considered when adjusting one's story. First, asylum claimants must perform 'victimhood' and dissimulate knowledge they have accumulated about the asylum procedures. Second, they must testify strong fears of persecution if they ever are sent back to their countries of origin, claiming thus that narrating ordeals of the journey through the sea to Europe and poverty back in their countries of origin is not sufficient to *make a good asylum case*; instead, protection seekers have to convince the judges that there is no authority to provide protection back home.

Indeed, protection seekers are assisted by informal actors in the asylum industry (peer migrants, interpreters, etc.) to gain awareness on the intricacies of asylum determination procedures in force. F., claims his capacity in influencing the choices taken by protection seekers through indicating relevant channels and information such as finding a 'less-strict' prefecture where case-officers are reputed to be 'flexible' with asylum seekers, adopting caution when interacting with formal actors, and spotting cities where asylum applicants are of a less number comparing to other places. Indeed, F., informs:

> "*To ask asylum and appeal your case you have to find a good city where there are few people applying for asylum and where there is a prefecture with less problems for the asylum seekers [...] One mustn't seek the advice of lawyers... you cannot ask your lawyer "is it good if I say this or that". Don't forget that you don't pay money to that lawyer... the government does... they have connections with each other, they manage appointments for the interviews and modalities of the translation [...] Lawyers and officials will not always do things to your favor*".
> (F., an Iranian male 12 years in Italy, Marghera, May 2020)

Indeed, the above-mentioned indications can be echoed in other migrants' testimonies on their quest to acquire legal protection. As S., depicts

> "*At first, they gave me nothing, they did not trust me [...] after a long time going around Italy, I meet many people that told me what to do and how to do it... They also told me to go to Palermo... there you find where you sleep and stay untill you fix your problem... I won my case and I got three years, subsidiary protection. Listen... me and my brother were in the same place, we*

shared all the way to here... they gave him humanitarian for two years and me political (asylum) with three years. When we went to do the commission, I said my story and he said his story... We got different papers. With the commission, each one has his own destiny! [...] At first I told them my story with lots of confusion and fear and I was denied twice, Once I learned how to say it, I won my case. It's crazy."
(S., a Sudanese male 7 years in Italy, Mestre, February 2020)

Following the testimonies of the interlocutors, we can ruminate that asylum claimants are co-erced by the guidelines in force to transform their fragmented trajectories into consistent nar-ratives. They are conditioned to comply with the credibility determinants embodied in the Ital-ian asylum procedures, where refugees are seen either as 'victims' and helpless or counterfeit. Notwithstanding the constraints that arise during the asylum determination, protection seeker's encounters with information on credibility determinants as framed in guidelines in force, allow them to build knowledge about ways to adjust their fragmented personal experience and ma-neuver their stories to match the constitutive criteria of credibility.

If we look at credibility assessment and recognize the various practices of assessment as forms of reaction to what is deemed to be 'counterfeit' asylum seekers, we apprehend that subjecting asylum seekers to processes of surveillance render migrants manageable and forced to comply with practices into force. In fact, the various practices of credibility evaluation seem to introduce an interstice upon which protection seekers act to certify their eligibility through reshaping a fragmented personal story into narratives conveying their need for protection. Despite the fact that these bureaucratic practices are often deployed to reverse access to legal protection to those framed as 'counterfeit', these filtration practices create a counter-productive effect; they are the ground on which tactics of protection seekers develop. In fact, when claimants are aware of the 'suspicion' culture in circulation among case-officers they tend to narrate their stories in detail, mentioning places and spaces crossed, avoiding any suspicion that could arise at the case-officer when interrogating the claimants about events, places, contexts all along the jour-ney to Italy. F., insisted that these elements are to be considered when adjusting one's story of persecution in order to confirm the guidelines in circulation and the images of refugees as vic-tims of war and persecutions (Fassin *et al*. 2010).

The underlined occurrences testified by migrants highlights the importance of taking into ac-count the heterogeneous actors involved in the quest for legal protection deployed by pro-tection seekers and their ways in acting upon this quest both from inside and outside bureau-cratic and administrative institutions. Encounters with peer migrants, former asylum seekers, interpreters, social assistants indicate ways places, people and knowledge can shape the access to asylum procedures, appeals and eventually access to legal protection. These dynamics (re) construct relationships between formal and informal actors through the ways each take position and act on procedures, criteria, and images in circulation. Therefore, even against the various forces deployed to curve the access to legal protection migrants find their ways to adapt to the power deployed by asylum determination and open interstices in the sphere of assistance and legality. Overall, practices behind restoring stories of persecution must not be understood here as an 'invention' of persecution; rather they are modalities through which a fragmented personal story is resumed and redressed-to-match the credibility determinants. Only when this match is maneuvered, protection seekers make a good case and find ways to access the channels of legal protection.

Now, to conclude these testimonies, a quick consideration on the *right to opacity* and the right to not be understood on the institutional (Khosravi, 2018; Cabot, 2019) is strongly required. While some will urge to make visible strategies and tactics of migrants in coercive context either to ro-manticize their agency or to illustrate ways they circumvent power structures, we call for taking a step back and reconsider the over-visibilization and the over-accounting of migrants' everyday life. This is to say that when generating narratives and testimonies about social realities of the *subalterns*, one shall moderate the urge to document and write about tactics making it possible

for these subjects to survive a hostile environment. As far as the processes shaping credible narratives of persecution are concerned here, we choose to moderate the academic temptation to reveal what is kept underground. The reason is that we should not forget that often the academic work intersects with the industries of migration management. In this mountain hostile environment against illegalized migrants, researchers shall be concerned with the potential representation of the subjects of research outside the academic field. When we account the way some racialized people navigate legal statuses and the ways they use resources at their disposal, what echoes could that make in a context with a mounting suspicion on protection seekers? To mitigate the risks, we attempt to keep opaque the operational modalities in shaping a credible narrative. If the data collected stemmed from the invitation people provided us to enter their world, this means remaining loyal to the implicit conventions of alliance developed through the fieldwork; to the empathy we developed and the privacy to which the interlocutors have testified. With that being said, the narratives of the interlocutors are rather a moon-pointing finger to underscore the mounting suspicion on 'counterfeit' asylum seekers and ways they (re)invent and (re)shape narratives of the asylum-seeking-self. The interest here is not exposing details about their tactics in undergoing a hostile asylum system, but rather to underline the structural constraints triggering their resourcefulness in overcoming illegalization.

Building legitimacy

In a context where the legitimacy of asylum is more and more in decline (Fassin *et al.* 2007a) we tend to witness more suspicions framing protection seekers as 'counterfeit' (De Genova, 2013). State agents in charge of asylum cases slip into the more or less conscious role of the "moral entrepreneur" (Becker, 1963), to justify discretionary power (Becker, 2022), to justify the state discretionary power. Indeed, it is based on lack of credibility that the interlocutors were denied protection upon the first stance. The claimant must find the right story, and the state agent must explore the "grammar of actions" (Boltanski *et al.* 1991b) and of the story, i.e., the type of rules through which the claimant justifies and constructs a socially and admirably acceptable narrative. However, the fear of deportation and the long wait in structures of asylum operate as factors driving the subjects to navigate circuits of assistance so to challenge the denial of their asylum claims. The encounters with the « facilitators of asylum » are often rewarded with information, building thus know-how on restoring one's narratives of persecutions in accordance with credibility criteria in force. Telling the 'good' story is always sought by the interlocutors when encountered with credibility-based examinations deployed by caseworkers upon the substantive interview. The claims of asylum in this context are in fact stories grounded on events that happened in the past (Cabot, 2014: 113), in other contexts, other social realities, other countries than the country where the asylum is claimed. The fear of persecution is hardly to be justified by documented evidence (Shuman *et al.* 2010). Accordingly, the narrated stories of sufferance and its coherence, play a crucial role in conveying claimants' eligibility to a given form of protection. In her work on the formation of persecution narratives, Puumala (Puumala *et al.* 2017) has shown how this narrative takes shape in a dynamic space where verbal and nonverbal means of communication intersect to draw ways to the interpretation, the transcription, and the evaluation of the narrative of persecution. The multimodality of conveying one's narrative of persecution allows us to understand how protection seekers make persecution more legible.
Information in circulation about the figures assigned to protection seekers (Fassin, 2007), and credibility assessment criteria in force allow a window of opportunity for asylum seekers and their supporters to challenge the filtration practices ranging these subjects in term of countries of origin and type of lived ordeals without consideration to individual cases. Thus, protection seekers adopt, adapt, and restore their narratives aspiring to reverse the denial judgment and open an interstice in the space of eligibility.

The emerging literature on bureaucratic practices in asylum determination procedures has underscored the capability of judges (Kobelinsky, 2018; Sorgoni, 2018), caseworkers (Affolter, 2019) and administrators (Gibb, 2019) to act and influence the processes of credibility assessment, shaping thus the practice of formal regulations. Notwithstanding the importance of these reflections, protection seekers themselves and their capability to act on credibility assessment has remained little researched, often compensated by examinations to formal actors' practices. As we explore testimonies of migrants, we gain sight that protection seekers themselves can also play a crucial role in acting on the course of the formation of credibility determinants. The interaction between *migrants-bearers-of-information*, as shown above, allows sight into the importance of weaving connection with other migrants previously experienced with similar conditions. People to meet, information to gather, and circuits to cross form paths for a circumscribed agency (Cabot, 2014) bounded by the encounters with facilitators of asylum (peer refugees, migrants, interpreters, lawyers, and social workers). By navigating assistance and the bureaucratic practices of asylum determination in Italy, Sub-Saharan protection seekers shape their know-how on ways to deal with bureaucratic intricacies. « The strategies of navigation, therefore, enable migrants to achieve their objective [...] However, migrants' experiences, notwithstanding their legal situations or how long one spent in the country, remain characterized by precarity and temporariness » (Tuckett, 2015, 124). Unlike many protection seekers who unsuccessfully navigated the bureaucratic labyrinth of the Italian asylum determination machine, and thus caught in illegality, the Sub-Saharan refugees who participated in this research were able to obtain a certain level of assistance and collect information on the institutional environment, its inconsistency, its elasticity, and thus have gained an interstice in legal protection.

Disciplining the migration process through testimony's credibility

The bureaucratic process aims to; to quote Judith Butler on gender (Butler, 1990), discipline the migrant's identity through a set of practices and justification. However, this disciplinary process seeks to subvert the migrant's identity through new *ways of knowing* (Hogan and Pink, 2010). This gives the migrant the opportunity to explore other modalities of inversion of the self and the experience of sufferance. The migrant enters a new birth process; entering «a machinery of power that searches, disarticulates and recomposes him» (Foucault 1975, 139). This «political anatomy» defines how the migrant must justify his ordeal and access to legality. It is through the testimony of persecution that a new migrant in born, or in the process of being so. The bureaucratic process of asylum determination disciplines migrants to procedures to make them docile, in performance within the power. It is through the process of certifying one's ordeals that the migrant engages in a relationship with the bureaucratic system, the asylum system and the society in general.

Indeed, the testimony appears as a matter of public concern (Chua *et al.* 2021). It is a means of reflexivity for the anthropologist, as it is for the witness. However, it is difficult to lump all categories that lend themselves to testifying together. Migrants, as figures of the margin, are excluded from this testimony as public interest. Here, we mobilize the concept of the margin as a space of in-between, where the margin is a space of life in which actors question the official discourse on migration and challenge their exclusion. It is a different way of understanding society, a form of otherness, a reflection of non-conformism. By its non-conformism, the margin marks its own borders of practice, giving the possibility to its members to assert their identity according to their affiliation to the world as migrants who must justify and prove their suffering.

The legitimacy of asylum does not depend on the law only, but also on the involvement of the facilitators and controllers of the access to legal paths of migration. Social workers and bureaucrats, as they can appreciate or not the testimony, come together to shape and transform the testimony of one's eligibility to legal protection. The migrant in this case is not an object of right,

he occupies a non-right sphere, and he is primarily excluded through processes of suspicion and illegalization. It is through the performance of personal truth and testifying on sufferance that the migrant can break out of the non-right sphere and gain access to legal protection. By collecting testimonies, the anthropologist becomes an element of this chain of evidence and becomes a witness to the migrant's suffering and ordeals. Thus, we raise the question, what could migrants' claims to truth contribute to the production of anthropological knowledge?

Our work shows how the actors fabricate their past and present through testimonies. Beyond the issue of truthfulness and falsification, the actors starve to respond to the demands of the bureaucratic machine. By testifying for oneself, the migrants produce a counter-truth to that circulating in anti-migrants' political discourses, which accuses migrants of evading Europe. These occurrences underscore ways truths are produced, articulated and evaluated; and how migrants construct their own counter-truths and self-staging narratives, with the aim of transforming the point of view of the structures involved in the asylum system. Rather than simply involving the revelation or restitution of a truth, the testimony challenges and produces a specific type(s) of truth. It is primarily about producing evidence, whether it is forensic, expert, or traumatic experience (Scott, 1991). This leads to the idea that «the capacity to witness is not innate or automatic, but often the outcome of one or more transformation(s) » (Chua *et al*. 2021: 11).

When working on the testimony of migrants, we notice that the discourse of migrants changes along their journey. In other studies, in Morocco (Mouna *et al*. 2018; Kchikach *et al.* 2020), we note that migrants denunciate the connivance of European policies with authoritarian regimes in Africa. This discourse changes to give way to individual justification, to the path of suffering, when they arrive in Europe. We are therefore far from seeking the truth produced by the testimony, but rather how it is generated from a necessity, and inscribed in a changing space-time. Notwithstanding the testimony seeks to achieve its formal objectives in terms of bureaucracy, whether in Morocco or in Italy, the testifying subjects only accepts to testify when they are reassured of our empathic position; as we have lived a migratory journey as well (France, Italy), which for them is important to understand their story. This is a testimony that goes through a network circuit, and we provoked it by the trust established with these migrants, because as it has been underlined before, the testimony is not an innate behavior, it is an acquisition.

Being a witness depends on the double transformation of narrator (witness/victim) and documenter (NGO/defender) (Chua and Grinberg, 2021). However, this transformation and the subject positions with the testimony can change; our interlocutors choose the place of our encounter, forced us not to see anything else besides the circumstances they wanted to expose. Here, emerges the role of researcher in producing and shaping the testimony. The testimony is a long process, in which the migrant makes sure of the reliability of our approach, asks questions about our purpose, our links with the authorities. As the encounters are multiplied, the testimony takes a form of confidence. We sought to engage in a cautious relation without making our interlocutors feel any pressure from us. It is a matter of producing a different context from the one which the migrant produces a testimony in front of the authorities. This means giving the interlocutors the choice of time, space and duration of their testimony.

At last, the fieldwork is a form of invisible theater where the researcher and his interlocutor keep changing and reversing roles, each one "acts" and "observes" where the intentions of those who testify can remain invisible to us (Castañeda, 2006a: 82). The testimony of the migrants cannot be reduced to transfigured expression, but it must be « the result of a hermeneutic work developed by the people themselves and thereby analyze the way they were constructed, negotiated or contested in an incessant work of determining the meaning of the action » (Boltanski, 2002a 282). Thus, our make explicit the categories, the rules of justice put forward by the actors to give reason to the action of migration and asylum.

In front of a commission's representative, the migrant must have two types of stories to tell, either the story that begins with because or because of, he or she must emphasize the necessity and urgency of his or her migration, which may be linked to war, genocide, natural disaster... these

are the good migrants, because certain death awaited them. Unlike the good migrant, the use of for and in order to transform the migrant into a suspect, leaving his country to improve his living conditions, and in order to live a new adventure and fulfill himself, is not something allowed to people from the South, they are bad migrants. This situation is described by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr in his novel Silence du Chœur, about the arrival of migrants in southern Italy. For Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, a good migrant is one who is in the process of becoming an almost dead migrant, one who has a breath left to tell us why he left. Recognizing a migrant's suffering through his testimony is like granting him a diploma, as Mohamed Mbougar Sarr rightly puts it, "Migrant is a form of diploma that has to be earned, with different mentions, the most prestigious of which is: " almost died for real " (Mbougar Sarr, 2022: 184). It is in this perspective that the migrant adjusts his testimony to fit the image of administration, replacing the desire to live a better life with that of suffering and victimization, in order to increase the probability of a successful testimony.

Conclusion

The article has focused on the praxis of credibility assessment with respect to its connections to protection seekers' tactical maneuvering in certifying their sufferance and fears of persecutions upon the substantive interview. Far from reinforcing the victimization of protection seekers and the primacy of the bureaucratic practices, our argument has drawn attention to diverse expressions of the certification and the approval of credibility, highlighting also the capacity of protection seekers to act on credibility determinants upon asylum determination procedures. We have argued that the practice of credibility assessment in Italian asylum determination procedures exerts power on migrants through classifying, naming, and ranging them in general categories such as 'comers from safe countries of origin'. Such proliferation of categories and criteria compels people to adopt and adapt more or less calculated tactics about how to configure their images and testimonies in order to match constitutive credibility determinants in the Italian asylum regime and open interstice in legality. On the same line, agency of protection seekers is susceptible to be shaped according to encounters with bearers of information on the Italian asylum system.

The analysis of Sub-Saharan protection seekers' quest for credibility certification has gained insights from and contributed to critical analysis on asylum determination procedures, participating thereby in underlining the placement of asylum seekers themselves in acting on credibility determinants. Although asylum determination have been conceived as extremely bureaucratic and shaped by law doctrines, practices observed in the field have underscored the implementation gap between determinants as written and their practice on the ground. This case study underscored ways actors concerned with asylum determination tend to operate with the system, shape the system and even create interstices inside the system. Credibility determinants are not only a sum of systematic and doctrinal criteria governed by intact regulation; they are rather implemented by subjects often bringing their personal apprehension of credibility and truthfulness. Credibility assessment as practiced refer to different forms of (re)definition of asylum determination procedures. In our sense, inquiring on asylum determination procedures require a strong consideration of the private speech of both formal and non-formal actors. As shown above, collecting testimonies *of* and *on* different actors' practices allows grasping actions, discourses, and representations that shape the course of asylum procedures, nuancing thus the doctrinal understanding of the asylum procedures.

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