LOST AS BELONGING IN TERRA INCOGNITA

Life as a refugee in depopulating villages in Italy

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Abstract

Throughout Europe, refugees are placed in remote areas to address issues around rural depopulation and shortages of urban accommodation. Depopulating villages often combine cultural homogeneity, high unemployment, limited public services and poor public transportation, which may lead to social, cultural, economic and physical isolation, which in turn complicates the process of establishing new connections. Where refugees are located has an enormous impact on their chances to prosper, yet their experiences have remained under the radar of policy makers and academic researchers who have largely focused on developing prescriptive theory. This multimodal research takes the case of Valle di Comino, Italy and uses written, visual, audio and collaborative ethnographic methods to both explore and express the ways in which refugees in remote depopulating villages experience and create a sense of belonging. The result is a written text, a documentary short film and a visual guide. Together they set forth the argument that being lost has become the way of belonging for most refugees as they try and navigate a lifeworld that is characterised by the unknown.
The digital version of this text includes interactive elements. Bullets that have a hover effect, can be clicked and will reveal images and video stills. More than illustrating the text they are meant to give a complementing experience and make crossreferences between text, film and guide. The image can be closed again by clicking anywhere on the page. Interactivity has been tested in Adobe reader, which can be downloaded for free. This document may not display correctly in other PDF readers.
The film uses the idea of a 'portal' to get us into the alternative reality of terra incognita. (01:11 - 01:18) The guide shows different ways of navigating the book as it aims to encourage wandering on the basis of curiosity. guide page 5-7.

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From the moment we arrive in my temporary new home, I’m overcome with immense sadness – or perhaps panic is a better word. It tightens my throat. We had joked about, that after a short holiday, Larry was going to drive me in the rental car to this place and then leave me - isolated, alone - while he flies back to Amsterdam. Here in the old centre of Atina on top of the hill, you can count the shops and cafés on one hand. There is the cold, the rain, a bus network of which no one knows the timetable and an endless echo through the house and the streets. It boomerangs my own sounds back at me, letting me know that there is really no one but me. The joke is not so funny anymore. Before he leaves, we visit the library across the house. A sigh of relief. It is beautiful, warm and calm, the way a library should be. Larry makes the mistake of asking for English books in a fruitless effort to find me a distraction for when he leaves. The librarian is clearly upset by this question. He responds in what sounds like Italian dialect, and although we don’t really understand it, he seems to be complaining about all the people that don’t appreciate the Italian language\textsuperscript{1}. We leave and search for a supermarket, but they are all closed for lunch between 1 and 4pm. Restaurants should be open, but we can’t find any. We drive through the valley’s quaint, but empty villages before heading back to Ponte Melfa; Atina’s ‘commercial centre’ at the bottom of the hill. To walk here from my new home would take 45 minutes, first downhill, and then back uphill, on the main road and passed loud barking dogs. The ‘centre’ consists of one depressing street with fast driving cars, a couple of odd shops and a threatening grey sky above it. Finally, we find a supermarket with \textit{orario continuato}\textsuperscript{2} somewhere off the main road. Without a car at my disposal, and no supermarket within walking distance, we pack the car full of groceries, mainly chosen by Larry as I can barely think. We drive back to the house, unload the food, and then he takes the car and leaves. I’m alone with kilos of pasta, frozen pizzas, litres of long-life oat milk, several dozen eggs and all the rest that should make sure that, though I may suffer from loneliness, I will surely not suffer of hunger. In an effort to keep it together I go to the library. I connect my computer to the WiFi network, but it is so weak that I cannot sync my emails. The computers are running (crawling) on a different, slightly faster WiFi, but the librarian doesn’t know the password. Trying to hack the network momentarily calms my emotions. At 6pm the library closes, I say goodbye to the librarian, and walk to my house. And then I’m really alone. Me, the pasta, the enormous amount of recording equipment and some clothes, all drowning in the space of my new house. Of course, this was the point of the whole research, isolation, being alone. But I think in some naive way I thought I could experience it, without feeling the effects of it. Without TV or internet, I use all my mobile data to download podcasts, just to fill the silence with other people’s voices. After months of reading literature, thinking through my research, improving and defending it in meetings, I have now arrived. And then, it doesn’t take off with a bang, a storm, a fight, instead it is like opening a tap that only drips, a fire that doesn’t light. I am just here.

\textsuperscript{1} Later I get to know him as a really kind man named Mario, who together with Luciano manages the library. They were always in for a chat and have helped me gathering materials and books for my research.

\textsuperscript{2} ‘Continued opening time’, meaning they do not close for lunch.
Introduction

In hindsight the first few hours of my arrival show an uncanny resemblance to the continued experience of refugees who are being placed in this area, awaiting their asylum. They face similar struggles with mobility, isolation, miscommunication and empty days in an empty place, which they try to navigate based on things familiar to them. They too use their phone to break through the loneliness and silence. They even have to work through the same kilos of pasta bought by house managers that focus on physical wellbeing, while ignoring the struggles with mental health that can also make people bedridden. “I am just here” and “I feel lonely” were common ways to describe the frustration and dread related to the idea that arriving in Europe did not kick-start a new life. The point is not that my experience is any way similar to the lives of refugees. On the contrary, it is precisely because our lives are different, and yet these initial experiences so similar, that we are urged to consider that it matters where people are placed.

Throughout Europe, refugees are relocated to remote areas to address issues around rural depopulation and shortages of urban accommodation. Where refugees are located matters for their chances to prosper, and yet their experiences have remained under the radar of policy makers and academic researchers (Jones and Teytelboym 2016:152). Refugees’ ‘uprootedness’ is generally mistaken for ‘rootlessness’ so that they are treated like self-contained units to be analysed and managed with limited regard to specific situations, experiences or needs (De Genova 2002; Malkki 1995; Tsing 2015). The heavily controlled movement of refugees in general, the relocation to remote areas in specific, and the overall lack of research on how this is experienced by refugees, is symptomatic of this attitude. The refugee ‘crisis’ may have warranted a top-down approach that focuses on basic needs, in the aftermath however, questions should be around what home means and how it is created against a backdrop of forced migration and increased xenophobia. This multimodal research takes the case of Valle di Comino, Italy and uses written, visual, audio and collaborative ethnographic methods to both explore and express the ways in which refugees in remote depopulating villages experience and create a sense of belonging. The result is a written text, a documentary short film and a visual guide. The materials can be accessed via www.land-unknown.eu or upon request. Together they set

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3) Caring for people’s mental wellbeing is assigned to psychologists, which are frequented only by some, and are being laid off under new budget rules following the Salvini Decree.

4) The years after 2015 when the number of asylum applications tripled to 1.3 million. In 2017 the number dropped again to 700 thousand applications (Eurostat 2018). European countries were overwhelmed during this period. In Italy for example, people would sleep on mattresses on the floor, in small rooms shared with more than 10 people. Though the number of asylum applications had increased, what made it a ‘crisis’ (assuming it needs to be a crisis at all) was the inability of European countries to cope with the applications in an organised and humane manner. People have therefore also called it a crisis of solidarity or morality; towards refugees as well as between European countries (Fassin 2016).

5) In the Netherlands for example, the principle of bed bad brood (bed bath bread) has guided national refugee policy.

6) Fieldwork conducted between January and March 2019.
forth the argument that being lost has become the way of belonging for most refugees as they try and navigate a lifeworld that is characterised by the unknown.

Questions on belonging are important from an individual perspective, as a lack of belonging has been shown to correspond to mental, physical and behavioural problems (Baumeister and Leary 1995:511); from a social perspective, as it is said that to belong is the “ultimate mark of living in an integrated community” (Ager and Strang 2008:178); and from a political perspective, as belonging to an organised community is considered the foundation of all human rights (Arendt 1973:297). It also has an inherent value as belonging understands people as part of an entangled and dynamic web of identity, community, locality and history that gives meaning to existence (Miller 2003). As such it conceptually reverses the alienation of refugees from their context. Lastly, understanding belonging from the perspective of refugees enhances our understanding of belonging more generally. Belonging is closely linked to place – not in the sense of territory, but as roots and routes (Urry 2000:133). Migration is therefore central to theories on belonging. As conflict and displacement disrupt the location of home, belonging in turn becomes central to studies on refugees (Perez Murcia 2018:2,4).

Refugees, asylum seekers and status holders, migrants, economic migrants, political migrants, forced migrants, immigrants, Africans, research participants, friends, extracomunitari8 or people. All of these terms are to some extent problematic. The problem of the label is indicative of a much wider issue with grouping people in a category that is only brought into existence to make them a “domain to be governed […] an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics” (Rose 1999:33). A process which Li (2011) refers to as ‘rendering technical’. The uncritical use of the label ‘refugee’ would make social scientists accomplices to the naturalness of a category that only exists because of immigration law (Black 2001:63; De Genova 2002:423; Malkki 1995:496). Though the category may be without ontological reality, it most certainly has a social reality that intervenes in social life9. From the moment someone applies for refugee status, (s)he is subject to refugee law and related political mechanisms. No matter what their specific background or reason to come to Europe, it is these people that in all their difference are met with similar processes and experiences that influence a sense of belonging. To ignore the existence of the category would be to deny this social reality and be unable to

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7) Alienation, and the previously mentioned notion of self-containment need to be understood in the way they are conceptualised by Tsing (2015). Alienation refers to the process in which “things are torn from their lifeworld to become objects of exchange”. It both assumes and produces self-containment; the idea that “individuals are not transformed by encounter”, which makes it possible to treat them as interchangeable units that can be placed anywhere without scholars and policymakers needing to take the cultural and natural histories that are at stake. (2015:121,28,34).

8) An Italian-specific word, that refers to people from outside of the European Union.

9) Pels (2018) distinguishes between a category as description, construction and intervention and argues that though labels may not describe any ‘real’ object in the world, we can still study the ways they are constructed and intervene in social life.
research, question or change the experiences that come with it. Thus, it is not ‘refugee-
ness’ that I am interested in, but rather the socio-political condition of being a refugee. By
lack of a better word I use the term refugee, which I define as any person who is seeking
or has been granted asylum, but is not (yet) given citizenship\textsuperscript{10}. This I prefer over the
technically more accurate notion of ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘status holder’. Refugee connotes
refuge; a place or state of safety. It draws the attention linguistically to the human need
for safety rather than the judicio-political system that has founded the notion of asylum.

The notion of home or belonging has largely been ignored in refugee studies which
has focused primarily on developing prescriptive theory, and which lacks ethnographic
work more generally (De Genova 2002:421). Belonging has a long academic history,
albeit under different headings such as home, place and recognition in disciplines such
as anthropology, sociology, human geography, environmental psychology and existential
philosophy. By expanding on these studies through ethnographic work this project builds
an interdisciplinary theory of belonging and demonstrates the value of ethnography in
other disciplines. By experimenting with collaborative and audio-visual methods, this
research also contributes to the body of work that is concerned with research methods in
the social sciences.

**Knowing and unknowing**

Every research starts from a position of not-knowing and presumes the knowability of
something unknown. The way we do research depends however on the nature of the
unknown that we are interested in. In the context of refugees, we have to be suspicious
of our knowledge, including our known unknowns as this is tainted by political discourse
and prescriptive theories. This makes doing research complex. If something is totally
unknown it cannot be (a little bit) known. Thus, the move from one to the other is not
gradual, it is not a path or a bridge – it is a leap. And to say anything about either the leap
(method) or what we are leaping towards (hypotheses) is to claim some sort of knowledge
of the unknown. At the same time, going in blank can be just as blinding as the cursory
looking of preconceived ideas and theories. What I have done in this research, and what
I have mimicked in this text is making myself accustomed to what is already known,
and then look for ways to destabilise this to become vulnerable to the unknown. Jacob
Rantzau called this “the quest for control over the arbitrary” (2017). He would place some
of his sketches on the floor of his studio, let people walk on them without knowing, and

\textsuperscript{10} Whenever possible I use less tainted words like ‘people’, ‘migrant’ or ‘research participant’. Only in the case that this may lead to
confusion do I use the term ‘refugee’. Note that my definition of refugee is significantly different from the formal definition under
Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: someone who is fleeing their country for fear of persecution
“for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (United Nations 1951)
hope that the changes would cause him to look differently. It shows that an interest in unknowns may involve processes of unmaking and unknowing. I have used audio-visual, collaborative and ethnographic methods as my own ways to control the arbitrary, and to challenge and see beyond my own horizon. Participation and observation were supposed to be straightforward ways of inviting in the unknown without predicting it. I struggled however, with refugees being largely idle.

Hanging out, I haven't really figured it out. I am literally sitting next to them on the couch, the bed or a chair, not doing anything. Either I am looking at them sleeping, being on their phone or talking to each other in a language I don't understand. Any information I can gain from this has been gained. We talk, a conversation which is always led by me and quite easily turns the observation into an interview. How do I hang out?

Ironically, it became easier to ‘hang out’ once ‘hanging out’ was not the primary goal anymore, when I started initiating activities with them. There would be enough time and interactions in and around these activities, which could equally be observed, but the activity itself would not be about observation. I wanted to use the camera as a way to reveal the unknown, unseen and invisible (Suhr and Willerslev 2012; Taylor 1996; Vertov 1984). Initially this self-imposed principle obstructed my vision as I kept on judging my images even before they were made. Once I allowed myself to be led by intuition, rather than principles, I found that the unseen was not necessarily captured in any single (preconceived) image, but it would occasionally surface in specific moments during filming, when accidently juxtaposing recordings during montage, or when re-watching footage late at night.

Relying on the polysemous and denoted nature of imagery I wanted to use the camera as a way to reveal the unknown, unseen and invisible (Suhr and Willerslev 2012; Taylor 1996; Vertov 1984). Initially this self-imposed principle obstructed my vision as I kept on judging my images even before they were made. Once I allowed myself to be led by intuition, rather than principles, I found that the unseen was not necessarily captured in any single (preconceived) image, but it would occasionally surface in specific moments during filming, when accidently juxtaposing recordings during montage, or when re-watching footage late at night.

Amadou is sitting next to me in the car as I’m driving him home. There is something about the dense tree line on my right, the last bit of sunset on my left, the intense blackness of the road and the prospect of his loud and intrusive shared house, that makes me stop. We listen through the audio recorder to dogs barking and the occasional car that passes. I film a tree that is lit up by my car’s flickering indicator lights. Tree. No Tree. Tree. No tree. And I film Amadou as he is patiently waiting for me to finish while he scrolls through his phone. When I look at the footage at home, I can see only his face as it is lit up by the flickering light of the phone. Tree. No Tree. Amadou. No Amadou. And I wonder, what is it that gives people light when you are left in the dark? And through what means do you claim an existence when existence is what is being denied? Tree. No Trec. Amadou. No Amadou.

11) Observation was conducted in a total of 4 houses (Alvito, Atina, Gallinaro and Villa Latina) and another 11 houses were visited in villages across and beyond Valle di Comino: Alvito (3), Arpino (2), Atina (4), Broccostella (1) and Sora (1). I spent time with people in their house, joined them in common and less common activities (school, work, dancing class, dancing therapy, lawyer and doctor visits) and initiated other activities. Alongside participant observation, I conducted 19 unstructured video-recorded interviews of which 11 were led by research participants; 2 semi-structured group interviews with grassroot community organisation RiseHub; 3 semi-structured interviews with 3 organisations that manage a total of 23 houses; 1 semi-structured group interview with three interpreters who are themselves status holders; and 4 semi-structured (group) interviews related to a youth employment project.

12) The idea that text is always already ‘connoted message’ and image is always also ‘denoted message’ (Barthes 1977:37).

13) People’s actual names are used unless a different name was requested by the participant, when certain information is deemed too sensitive or when someone has not given explicit consent for the use of their name.
Collaborative methods are a way of seeing through the eyes, hearing through the ears and experiencing through the bodies of others\(^{14}\). Understanding may thus involve a fusion of horizons in the sense of being able to see beyond our selves (Gadamer 2004). Based on the first few weeks I introduced a collaborative project inspired by the idea of a ‘subjective atlas’\(^{15}\). Where a normal atlas takes a bird’s eye perspective, the subjective atlas tries to grasp what it means to be in an area from the diversity of human perspective. Initially I imagined this as a kind of guide that could be made with refugees for future refugees. However, I found that such a guide was not needed as they learn very quickly how to get around physically, culturally and socially\(^{16}\). The real lack of knowledge is on the side of Italians who generally know only stereotypes about their new neighbours and seem to simply ignore them, as exemplified amongst others, by their complete incomprehension of my research topic.

Initially I use the word ‘rifugiati’ (refugees) to explain my research, but people look at me blankly. I try ‘migranti’ (migrants) to which they respond by talking about their family in Ireland. Marcella\(^{17}\) tells me I need to say ‘immigrati’ (immigrants) but they still mix it up with Italians emigrating. By now I uncomfortably add “gli Africani, i neri” (The Africans, black people). I get a surprised response “why could you not have done your research in the Netherlands, studying the Italians who are immigrating there”.

Convinced by the importance of social inclusion and the idea that interest in my research may actually be a covert curiosity for the lives of refugees, I decided to create a guide focusing on what it means to live as a refugee in Valle di Comino.

The biggest ethical challenge was the lingering issue of trust related to the precarity of the refugees’ situation (still in their asylum procedure)\(^{18}\), their past (people betrayed their trust) and the nature of my work (research, investigation, asking many questions). Stories were sometimes incomplete or inconsistent, especially in relation to their motivation for coming to Europe. Consequently, I did and do not always know what is a truth, a lie and what should be kept a secret. This has ethical as well as epistemological consequences as I cannot always be sure if what I know is true or not and if it can be revealed or not\(^{19}\).
What we get to know is not only dependent on what is being revealed, but also on who is doing the knowing. A different person would have a different experience and come to different, presumably complementing conclusions. It is situated knowledge, and it is the only kind of knowledge available to us when researching lived experience (Haraway 1988). This makes it worth reflecting on my own positionality. From day one I was welcomed by the Italian community; I would be shown around, strangers paid for my coffee, people were very interested and I was even offered a certificate for doing research in the region. I felt like an exotic creature. As I started to notice the lack of attention that the other newcomers received, it dawned on me that part of this welcome may be due to me being a semi-young blonde. People would often comment on my appearance; tell me they are interested in my research, but ignore the research participants standing next to me; and it has even happened that an African man would start a conversation, but that the Italian man would continue by responding only to me. The awareness of the extent to which the refugees would be ignored, while I had never been this visible in my entire life, has been a big influence on this research.

Working through the entangled modalities of sound, image, text and thought, and while writing, editing and composing, slowly the argument started to emerge that refugees are geographically living in Valle di Comino, but inhabit terra incognita – land unknown. Lost in this unknown has become the way of belonging for many refugees. This argument is developed, substantiated and made palpable through the text, guide and film. The guide has the dual purpose of bridging the gap between Italians and refugees, and enriching the research by showing the many ways in which people navigate their lifeworld. The film shows ways in which people are limited in their efforts to create a stable world, and the text provides stories, concepts and analyses that solidify the research argument. The text loosely mimics the journey of refugees, and the process of the research. The section on belonging gives the impression of stable ground with an exploration of the literature on the notion of belonging. The following two sections destabilise this notion while being living in Valle di Comino, but inhabit terra incognita – land unknown.

20) Offered in the first three weeks of my arrival, during an annual conference organised by Accademia Teretina.
21) Some experiences allowed me to gain access and support that I may otherwise not have had. Other, less pleasant experiences of racism or sexism, heightened my awareness to more subtle forms of in- and exclusion. It also made me even more committed to the potential social impact of this research.
22) Throughout the research I used iterative cycles of planning, recording, reviewing and analysis to pry out different perspectives. Upon return, I reviewed and tagged the materials with relevant names, places, sounds, topics and concepts. For the audio-visual materials I used Adobe Lightroom in which filtering allows you to see images/videos from different days and times next to each other. For written materials I used a tagging system in my OneNote field journal that allows you to summarise all paragraphs per tag. While creating the film I wrote down all the different scenes I had recorded, hung these on my wall at home and started to group and regroup them on the basis of different criteria. By placing otherwise separate text excerpts or (video) images next to each other, I would surprise myself with combinations that triggered new thoughts and insights. All together this can be seen as a way to ‘control the arbitrary’ in the process of analysis.
23) ‘Unknown land’ would be a more common translation for terra incognita than ‘land unknown’. However, I prefer the latter as I am using terra incognita not to indicate an actual land that is unknown, but the many different unknowns that make up a landscape.
24) Leaving home and waiting for asylum can be seen as a process of disintegration of everything that provided stability in someone’s life. This is mimicked by the middle three sections of this text.
motivating a different understanding of belonging under the notion of lost as belonging. The first and last section are the bookends of the text, that introduce and conclude the research, locate it geographically, epistemologically, experientially and ethically in terra incognita and reflect on my own position in relation to the research.

**Terra Incognita**

I am sitting with Silvia at a café that looks out over lake Posta Fibreno. Silvia, my age, has studied in Rome but moved back because this is where she feels at home. “In that lake floats an underwater island of vegetation” she says, “Valle di Comino is much like that island; it exists, you can’t see it, and it moves, but only slowly”. 25

When explorers of the past would be unable to continue, and they did not know what was beyond, they would describe that place on the map as terra incognita. There are many reasons for using this expression here. Firstly, refugees arrive in a place that is unknown to them, and with their arrival Italian residents are confronted with a world unknown. It is meaningful to talk about a terra – a land – as it is only because of a land, a country and borders that the term immigrant has any meaning. I also like incognito, meaning to be unrecognisable, masked, which is what many refugees are, either by force or by choice. Moreover, terra incognita connotes the explorations starting in the 15th century that led to ongoing imperialism. As such, the term functions as a reminder of the inescapable risk of dominating, in an effort to understand the other. The notion also refers to the epistemological challenge of getting to know something that is radically unknown to you (Solnit 2006:4). As we approach terra incognita, it disappears however, as it dissolves into terra cognita. A land unknown only exists when we acknowledge the boundaries of the known. It is with this humility and curiosity that I tried to do this research, and with which I hope others will engage with it.

Nowadays, no map would admit to there being any terra incognita. And yet, if we would have to geographically place it, it may well be Valle di Comino. Here, our modern-day way of dealing with the unknown – Google – fails us. If you type Valle di Comino into Google Maps it cannot locate it, place names are not referenced correctly, and Google Navigation will send you the wrong direction. Most maps, even ones from the region, would represent the villages as having only one street, whereas in actual fact the main road shoots off into many winding alleys. One day I was sent to a place called Palazzo Ducale. Though it was the main building of the village, I never found it as it was not located on any map and the outside of the building stated its name as Palazzo Castelmo. Moreover, many of the languages spoken here (African and Italian dialects) lack a dictionary, let

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25) Quotes are generally not verbatim unless conversations had been recorded.
alone an entry in Google Translate. Valle di Comino lives the tautological truth that you can only know it, when you already know it.

Valle di Comino is an area consisting of several small villages enclosed by mountains. Since the 1864 unification or conquest – depending on whose viewpoint you take – much of the wealth went North, most of Southern Italy impoverished, and many people started moving away in search of work. Valle di Comino is proud of its history of emigration, where most residents have family in Scotland, England, Ireland or the US amongst others. Some people have returned permanently and others come back only in the summer to visit family or connect to their ‘roots’. However, during the winter months in which I conducted research, the towns seemed dormant.

Italian tradition has it that extended families would live together in a palazzo with each family its own apartment. Some buildings carry the emblems of the family that still owns it. But times have changed and many young people live away from the family home. There are few employment opportunities in the region and young people feel disadvantaged by the older generations. With low birth rates, young people moving away, and older people passing away, the area has depopulated and unoccupied houses have deteriorated. With Italian culture and law skewed towards keeping the past, restoration costs can be astronomical and futile given that few people are interested to move into the area. Consequently, the towns are dotted with derelict houses and for sale signs that have been, and will be there for years. In an effort to celebrate life coming to the region, one church in Pescaseroli said “we always sound the bells when someone dies, from now on we will ring them a 100 times when new life is born”. Some young people have started to return under a trend known as new ruralism. Low wages and unstable contracts however make it difficult for young people to live independent lives. They often have to choose between a car or an apartment. In such a sparse region most choose the former and keep living with their parents long after they would like to. Meanwhile, the situation of depopulation threatens businesses and public services. It is within this context that in the past few years, refugee facilities have opened in 9 of the villages, hosting a total 124 asylum seekers at the time of this research.

Upon arrival, refugees leave their fingerprints, photos and fill in a first explanation of...

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26. This and the previous paragraph are based on conversations with older and younger Italian residents.

27. The provincial level (in this case Frosinone) is the lowest level at which data on refugees is gathered. To know the amount of reception facilities and the number of refugees, I had to find and engage the different housing organisations active in the area: La Casa di Tom (Atina), La Speranza (Alvito, Brocostella, San Donato and Villa Latina), Solecuore (Alvito, Casalvieri, Vicalvi, Campoli Appennino) and an organisation that I only got to know by the name of the owner: Sara (Gallinaro). Except for Sara, all other organisations have been very helpful in gathering the necessary data. Data in relation to Gallinaro relies on my own list of residents. In total there are 102 men (82%), 13 women (10%) and 9 children (8%). Most refugees in this region come from Africa (83%), the rest from Bangladesh (12%), Pakistan (3%) and Ukraine (2%). On average, there would be 7 people living in one house, with Gallinaro being the fullest house (26 people) and a particular house in Alvito being the least full (2 people).
why they are here (Modello C3). These are stored in a database, shared with EU countries and used to enforce the Dublin regulations. After staying for a few weeks in temporary accommodation, people await their asylum in a Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (SPRAR) or in a Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria (CAS). It may take two years before they receive the invitation to go to the commission where they tell their story. By far the majority of asylum requests are (wrongfully) denied. Most appeal the decision, a process which may take another year or two.

A SPRAR is initiated by and set up in collaboration with the community council. It is highly regulated and focuses on integration through language classes, employment services and psychological support, amongst others. The reasons for opening a SPRAR depend on the specific council. It may be a way to fuel the local economy as people are hired, and money is spent locally. It may also be an effort to repopulate the area in order to avoid the foreclosing of public services like schools, pharmacies or the post office that depend on resident numbers. Moreover, a SPRAR may open to avoid the opening of a CAS on which councils have little to no control and which puts little or no effort into outreach within the local community.

The CAS was brought to life in 2014 as temporary support to deal with the large number of refugees coming into the country, but it has become the most common refugee reception. To facilitate the quick opening and reception of refugees it is much less regulated, it gives less services, which is why it receives less money. Rather than the community council, it is the prefettura that authorises the opening of a CAS. The organisations that own a CAS are generally created by individuals looking for quick profit. House managers are hired to manage the house and the people in it. To the detriment of both the community and the refugees, these organisations treat refugee reception as “a profit-making business, limiting its interventions to the offering of essential services only, and ignoring the relational and empowerment dimension of its beneficiaries” (Galera and Giannetto 2017:73). The lack of services, the dilapidated state of the house, and the unresponsiveness of the house owner makes the house in Gallinaro a typical example of profit-driven refugee reception.
There are also exceptions. The other two CAS organisations in Valle di Comino would try to offer similar services to the SPRAR, while being given less funding to do so.

In October 2018 Decreto Sicurezza e Immigrazione (Security and Immigration decree) was introduced, commonly known as the Salvini Decree. It lays down new rules around asylum rights and procedures. Considering security and asylum as essentially being governed by the same law, reveals the tendency to conflate the political economy of border control with the moral economy of human rights. Humanitarianism thus becomes “a smoke screen that plays on the sentiment in order to impose (…) the brutality of realpolitik” (2011:2,111). The decree is ambiguous on many accounts and is being challenged in court, so that the exact changes and its effects cannot be established. One thing however, is that the role of the SPRAR has changed. Only people who already have their asylum documents can now be hosted in a SPRAR, while even more (financial) capacity is taken away from CAS organisations who try to offer any kind of service beyond the absolute necessary for survival; no more psychological support, no bus subscriptions and less to no language classes or translation support.

This section provided a lay of the land and tried to account for the absurdity of finding people from such diverse backgrounds as Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Morocco, Mali and the Netherlands between remote Italian mountains. The next section will consider the notion of belonging to prepare for a discussion on how refugees people experience a sense of home in this region.
Belonging can be defined as a mode of being where one is at ease with one’s surroundings, which means that ‘not-belonging’ needs to be understood as “the pathological state of being in which the individual is not properly connected to others or themselves”, expressed in feelings of uprootedness, existential anxiety or despair (Miller 2003:220). What is ultimately at stake is this feeling that one’s existence matters - what Heidegger (1962) called ‘being-in-the-world’. Feelings of belonging are never stable and need to constantly be achieved through the politics of belonging; a process of claim-making for space and recognition (May 2011:372). It is along the intertwined axes of identity, community, place and time that a politics of belonging unfolds to create feelings of belonging.

Many theorists characterise feelings of belonging as a mode of being in which we are fully ourselves (May 2011:372; Miller 2003:218). This pristine notion of belonging is at best an ideal state of affairs as belonging is more often a ‘longing-to-be’ (Hedetoft 2002:5). Even more so for migrants for whom ‘becoming no-one’ by destroying their identity papers (Vium 2014:227), or ‘becoming other’ through assimilation may be tactics of migration (Wekker 2016). The distinction between self and other implied in the notion of identity thus starts to disintegrate and a situated self emerges. Gammeltoft calls this dialogical movement an ‘agency-in-subordination’ in which one is ‘possessed’ by others through the dependencies and commitments that follow from being part of a social community (2018:77–78). Identity thus results in (competing) commitments to different ‘communities of belonging’ (Yuval-Davis 2006:200). Rather than an obstacle to ‘being ourselves’, it is only by surrendering ourselves to the relationships that matter to us that a self can emerge (Dalsgaard 2013:104). The self is also understood in dialogue with one’s own body (Irving 2013). Migrating from a bustling city to a sleeping village, from warm to cold weather, or from a working to a waiting life, each corresponds to mental and physical changes that shape how people understand themselves. Related to this is Arendt’s (1958) distinction between labour, work and action. What does it mean to be human when any, or all of these human activities are made impossible as a consequence of waiting for asylum.

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35 Informed by distinctions made between feelings and politics of belonging (May 2011), belonging and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006) place-belongingness and politics of belonging (Antonsich 2010), and Miller’s definition of belonging as “standing in correct relation to one’s community, one’s history and one’s locality [and] to be in accordance with who we are in ourselves as well as we are in the-world.” (2003:218).

36 “Labor is judged by its ability to sustain human life, to cater to our biological needs of consumption and reproduction, work is judged by its ability to build and maintain a world fit for human use, and action is judged by its ability to disclose the identity of the agent, to affirm the reality of the world, and to actualize our capacity for freedom” (D’Entreves 2019).
documents, social acceptance or individual purpose? Thus, instead of identity as inwardly and ontologically generated it needs to be understood as an (internal) dialogue with the self, others, one’s body and the physical environment (Taylor 1994:32).

Community refers to a shared culture or place and each community member has the right to participate in developing its ‘living tradition’. The frequent resistance against the arrival or refugees shows that belonging is a “hotly contested political issue with collective consequences” (May 2011:369). This situation may be exacerbated in culturally homogenous villages. As well as in the associative sphere of the community, belonging is also constructed in the politico-cultural sphere of the nation-state (Duyvendak 2011:112). Here, community becomes institutionalised in the form of citizenship, place is transformed into abstract territoriality, and familiarity is reinterpreted as nationality (Hedetoft 2002:3–4). Posel (2001) shows that people essentialise, naturalise and internalise collective identities. Likewise, through popular rhetoric on immigration the external European border has become internalised in people’s minds so that refugees become aliens, protection becomes discrimination, and cultural difference turns into racial stigmatisation (Balibar 2004:122). What is thus clear is that there are hierarchies of belonging (May 2011:369). As non-citizens refugees are arguably at the bottom of these hierarchies as their claims for recognition do not fall within the realm of rights, but in a framework of charity. After all, most countries endorse the right to asylum, but no country has a duty to actually grant asylum (Arendt 1973:297). The above shows that belonging is shaped at different scales; from the household to the community, national and global scale. Meanwhile, the arrival of refugees is also remaking scales (Tsing 2016:348). Local residents are partaking in an Italian and European debate on immigration; geographically isolated villages gain a sense of worldliness as their communities become more culturally diverse; and refugees stand in (virtual) relation to friends and family beyond the local scale so that different scales come into being.

“People are often thought of, and think of themselves as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (Malkki 1992:27). Choosing where to live, how to decorate it, which rules apply and how to maintain it, are ways for people to impose their character on a place and shaping a sense of belonging. Equally in the public space, navigating streets on the basis of meanings and memories and making informal claims on a place by using it, are ways of saying ‘we’ belong here (Fenster 2005:221,223,227; May 2011:369–71). Such meaning-making practices is what turns abstract space into concrete place (Cresswell 2014:15). Forced migration ruptures this place-identity relationship as it removes people from their accustomed surroundings, violates the mutual care-taking

375 For example
bond between person and place and undermines the capacity of places to act as “a stable reference point for experience, values, relations and actions” (Dixon and Durrheim 2004:459). In other words, it threatens a sense of familiarity (knowing the place), haven (feeling safe) and heaven (feeling free to be and express oneself) (Duyvendak 2011:38). This is enforced by the existence of boundaries, that aim to include some and exclude others. It is these boundaries that asylum seekers are trying to negotiate. However, boundaries are not only places where things stop, it is also where things may begin (Lems 2018:211). Space allows movement, whereas a pause in movement makes it possible to transform it into place (Tuan 1977:6). Being placed in depopulating villages may however complicate the process of establishing new connections as these areas often combine cultural homogeneity, an aging population, high unemployment, limited public services and poor public transportation, which may lead to social, cultural, economic and physical isolation. Moreover, where voluntary migrants are thought to “pick up their roots in an orderly manner”, in the case of refugees “broken and dangling roots predominate – roots that threaten to wither along with the ordinary loyalties of citizenship in a homeland” (Malkki 1992:32). From the perspective of the ‘host community’, displacement then is not only considered an appeal to protection, but also a loss of moral bearing; a pathological condition that is to be ‘treated’ with a system of power that aims to manage the space and movement of people out of place (1992:34). Placing refugees in remote villages is one example of such management. Movement is not only curtailed through political practises, power relations in the context of gender or ethnicity, may equally restrict the use of space (Fenster 2005:221,224,227-28).

Belonging is also created through a sense of and by placing oneself in time. Memory can be used to construct a sense of belonging in the past. For example, Perez Murcia argues that for internally displaced people in Colombia home has become a contested site that is neither here nor there and only really exists in people’s memories (2018:2,11). May’s (2017) study on temporal belonging amongst older British citizens reveals how the memory-image can be a way to construct a sense of self in the present, with its anchor in the past. It could however also become an obstacle for belonging so that “only by losing [the] past would they lose the condition of exile, for the place they were exiled from no longer existed, and they were no longer the people who had left it” (Solnit 2006:47). One could also construct a sense of belonging in the future. For example, Vium argues that young migrants leave their home in the hope “to one day become present, economically, in the lives of their families who are paramount in this project of social becoming” (2014:222). In the long periods of waiting that most refugees find themselves in, the present becomes secondary to the future (Crpanzano 1985:44).
Migration and transformation

“I begged in Libya to return to Cameroon. Instead they said that I will die here or I will go to Europe”. – Roger

“When you are on the road, you just want to go back, but there is no road back. The whole journey took a year. I was imprisoned twice. It is not an easy life. We all have our story. I would like to talk to politicians, but they wouldn’t listen. I am nobody” – Eva

On the journey people face death, illness, imprisonment, torture, threats, rape, hunger, thirst and pain. Family and fellow journey members die in front of their eyes, while they themselves need to continue. The journey, as well as many of the experiences that led people to migrate, have been transformative beyond return, so that the person that left home is not the same as the one who arrives in Italy. What was a struggle for life on the road, turns into a struggle for asylum as soon as they set foot in Europe. Countries only offer refuge for specific reasons so that people fleeing extreme poverty\textsuperscript{38}, environmental disasters\textsuperscript{39} or other reasons that necessitate their departure, need to come up with alternative stories. It admits a bias towards political and civil rights, over socio-economic rights. ‘The refugee’ starts to fill the ‘savage slot’ against which ‘the West’ can define itself as the great promotor and defender of democracy and freedom, even as it is violating those same human rights (Fassin 2016; Trouillot 2003:24). In the process of requesting asylum, transformation of the self may become a choice, a strategy to increase one’s chances for asylum. Some of the research participants claim to be homosexuals; reduce their age to be treated as a minor; or say they are nationals of another country. Those who flee from political persecution may also need to imagine stories as they have difficulty gathering the evidence for their actual story. After all, how do you prove your story when political violence does not reach international news, when there are no photos of how you were threatened in the middle of the night by armed police, and no evidence that your scars are

\textsuperscript{38} Economic migrant is often used as a derogatory term, assuming that only political migrants are ‘real refugees’. Lucht shows that extreme poverty can equally necessitate people’s departure, and that European trade policies and practises may have even caused such poverty (Lucht 2011:191–92). Moreover, it seems there is not one single straightforward reason for coming to Europe. We would have to make a distinction between the cause and the trigger for leaving. The cause may be more structural like poverty or violence, but the trigger may be more arbitrary such as the sickness of a parent (and therefore high medical costs), or a break up with a partner (and therefore less reason for staying) and often times it may be a combination of all the above and more. These are only guesses based on passing comments, as I generally tried to avoid talking about people’s reasons for departing in order to build or maintain a relationship of trust.

\textsuperscript{39} The Salvini Decree has limited many forms of asylum. It has however added the rare ability to apply for asylum for environmental reasons. The participants I have been working with are however still treated under the previous law which did not recognise such a form of asylum.
from violence in your country, and not from abuse along the journey. Sometimes evidence needs to be faked, to prove a true story. In order to be granted asylum, it is not only the veracity of people’s stories that is being judged, but also the sincerity of the people themselves during the commission interview (Fassin 2016). People need to embody and express their story, and only in the way a commission committee would expect them to. Thus, in the period of waiting for asylum, identities and stories are changed, and people start to live in the space between the true and false.

Different people cope differently with this period of insecurity. While some manage to learn Italian, find work or create meaningful relationships, for others the documents become an obstacle to everything that defines ‘normal’ life. Several men said they only wanted a girlfriend when they have their documents, because if she is Italian she may think he is with her for the papers, and if she is African it becomes difficult if asylum requests are denied. With his documents Gabriel could learn Italian in a few months if only he knew he would be staying there, Souleymane will move to another part of Italy so he could be selected for another football team, and Amadou will buy a bigger bed as he keeps on falling out of his current one. People are waiting for their documents so that they can visit friends and family in other parts of Europe. Most importantly, it is assumed that with their papers, it will be easier to find a job, if only because they could move to where the work is.

With few (young) people around, little opportunity to move around, and without work or meaningful relationships, the period of waiting turns into one of idle waiting. Every day people battle the emotional impact of waking up to nothing, and therefore for nothing. Knowing that tomorrow will be the same as today, which is the same as yesterday, robs any activity of its urgency. Anything you could do today, you could also do tomorrow. As a consequence, some choose to stay in bed most of the day.

“If you don’t do anything, you have an empty basket as a head. Here I have no value” – Richard.

It is a Saturday 3pm. I had asked the guys if it was ok for me to come, but when I arrive there is only Richard. I walk up to one of the bedrooms. The room is dark, someone is sleeping on a mattress on the floor, Kayin is asleep in his bed, and music is coming from the corner where Ousmane has pulled the blankets over his head. When I finally start an activity, I feel I need all my energy to lift their energy. We start drawing the map of the house. I brought icons that express certain emotions and ask them to place them in the house. Ousmane chooses...
the crying face (streaming tears) and places it in his bedroom. With a big smile he says “I cry. No documents. No work”. Solomon chooses this moment to participate. He laughs and says “that’s not how you should look at it”. Ousmane leaves and comes back later. “Only kids between 5 and 7 do drawings, only they do something to enjoy themselves”, he says. I ask what it is that adults do. “Only things to advance in life”.

The guy that had been sleeping on the mattress on the floor turns out to be Richard’s friend visiting from Sora. “I just needed a change of environment. It reduces stress. If you are always doing the same, staying in the house, it gives stress”. I ask him what else he does to feel better. He answers: “sleep and wake-up, sleep and wake-up, thinking will just disturb you”.

A person who chooses or is forced to lie all day in bed and “spends their day looking at a wall is (...) closing down their sensory nervous system by reducing external stimulation” will perceive the world and one’s place in it, differently (Irving 2013:63). This idea that the self is understood in dialogue with one’s own body may also be why many people do daily workouts with makeshift gym equipment. Other ways to deal with the dread is by actively searching for commitments that fill one’s time; football, Italian class and small jobs. A few people decide to move away completely to areas where there is more work, breaking the rules of needing to stay in the house, and as such risking that their asylum procedure gets revoked.

The period of waiting is made ever more uncertain as the political climate in Italy, with a populist government led by Salvini and Di Maio, is changing refugees’ rules and rights and in such an ambiguous way that Italians and refugees alike do not know what to expect. Aspettare in Italian has the dual meaning of waiting and expecting. Without the latter meaning, waiting becomes unexpectant waiting in which the future is characterised by ambiguity; sometimes a source of hope, other times a source of anxiety. The idea that belonging can be constructed in the future, as Vium (2014) implies, may only be the case if people know what they are waiting for. For most of the research participants, the period of waiting is marked by the maddening boredom of idle waiting, the anxiety of unexpectant waiting and the frustration of waiting in a world that keeps on moving without you.

I am visiting Rana. With his housemate Tariq he takes me to ‘the Bangladeshi house’. A group of men is sitting around the table, eating what looks and smells like a curry. All of the sudden a guy walks in crying. His father just died. The 8 men become silent and look down into their open hands as Tariq spontaneously starts a prayer, quoting the Quran by heart. Afterwards he explains that there are two lives; this life and jana, “a beautiful life, even if now there may not be work”. Rana starts talking about how difficult it is to get documents. Initially it strikes me as a minor worry when placed next to death, but as he continues to explain I understand that without documents this man cannot leave to be with his family and he cannot say goodbye to his father.
Control and dependence

The sense of anxiety and distrust is fuelled by the traumatic experience of the journey and an all-encompassing sense that people’s lives are not in their own control. The (local) government sets rules and procedures around asylum processes, the housing organisation manages budgets and rules, and the house managers42 enforce these and communicate between the organisation and refugees. Together these bodies control many aspects of refugees’ lives. Daily attendance sheets control mobility. People need to ask permission to the housing organisation for spending nights outside the house, which is limited to 3 to 14 days depending on the organisation. Travelling outside Italy is never allowed. There are however ways in which these rules can be circumvented. In fact, visiting friends is a common way in which people manage the daily dread of filling empty days.

“If I stay at home I will just be thinking too much. I am a mother of two kids, my dad is sick, and I have been on the road for more than two years.” – Mado.

Within a SPRAR, people are given money to buy their own food, but within a CAS food is controlled on many levels. The prefettura defines consumption quantities43, the house managers do the groceries, and in a house of more than 10 people there is a cook or catering that further decides what and when people eat. Those providing the food are generally unresponsive to what refugees would prefer to eat.

What they buy, what we eat, guide page 41. Often, I would be given food. Packs of white bread started to line my kitchen wall. “Do you have to feed them?” someone asked, “no they are feeding me” I said.

Extract from a call set out by the prefettura of Frosinone for CAS reception facilities

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prima colazione, composta da:
- 1 bevanda calda (200 cc a scelta latte, caffè, té);
- fette biscottate (4 fette biscottate) + 1 panetto di burro + 2 confezioni monoporzione di marmellata o miele. In alternativa, biscotti confezionati monoporzione da 60 gr.

pranzo o cena con alternanza dei menù previsti, composti da:
- un primo piatto (pasta, riso, cous cous gr.100/150 a seconda del condimento o gr. 80 pasta e 100 gr. di legumi o riso. Ammessi anche la pizza);
- un secondo piatto (carne rossa 150 gr. carne bianca 200 gr. o 250 gr. se con osso, pesce 200 gr., due uova, 100 gr. di formaggio);
- contorno di verdura 300 gr.
- frutta di stagione (150 gr. oppure 1 frutto, banana, melone, pera, arancia, ecc. o yogurt o, due volte a settimana, dolce monoporzione);
- 2 panini (gr. 60 ca.);
- 1 lt. di acqua minerale a capite.
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42) House managers may manage one or more houses. Exactly how active a house manager depends on the specific person. The SPRAR in Atina includes an office where there are several people employed who are always there during working hours. In Gallinaro, Gianni seemed to be visiting almost every day, but seemingly without a specific purpose. In many of the other houses, managers seemed to come only for delivering food once a week.

43) “For breakfast 1 hot drink (200 ml milk, coffee or tea), breakfast biscuits (4 biscuits) + 1 portion of butter + 2 single-portions of jam or honey. Alternatively, single-serving biscuits of 80g. Lunch and dinner may consist of – first course (100-150g of pasta, rice or couscous; or 80g of pasta and 100g of legumes or rice. Pizza is also allowed) – second course (150g red meat, 200g white meat or 250g if on the bone, 200g fish, 2 eggs, 100g cheese) – vegetable side dish 300g – seasonal fruit (150g or 1 fruit, banana, apple, pear, orange, etc. or yogurt or, twice a week, a single portion of dessert) – 2 sandwiches (60g each) – 1 litre of mineral water per person.”

All other products of consumption are managed to an equal level of detail. For example, people receive 6 toilet rolls per month and women can use 20 sanitary napkins per month.
With flavours being one of the few things people can bring from their home country, and with bodies that simply stop digesting when eating too much Italian food, many would go to a small international food shop in Sora to buy familiar products from their pocket money.

Controlling one’s own space is a way of creating a sense of belonging. Instead, much of the spaces refugees inhabit are controlled for them. House rules are set by housing organisations and sometimes enforced through deductions of pocket money. The women and children in the SPRAR have their own apartments, but all other people live in shared housing. Here furnishings are often insufficient, falling apart or malfunctioning. The hot water and heating is either not working at all, or centrally controlled by the organisation as they fear high heating costs. In Italian houses that are not built with winter months in mind, refugees stay warm by keeping their coats on, staying in bed, buying electrical heaters or warming up water on the stove. Doors generally do not lock, not even the bathroom and not even in houses that are shared between men and women. There is respect for each other and other people’s possessions, as well as unwritten agreement on entering other people’s rooms. It is therefore not safety, but privacy that is at stake. Even with general etiquette there is no private space as bedrooms are shared with 2, 3 or 4 people. People may be sleeping, chatting, praying and changing clothes in the same space. The only thing with a lock is the thermostat, and the only space that is locked are kitchens managed by cooks. Locks seem to gain a new meaning. Rather than offering a sense of protection for refugees, they seem to be offering protection from refugees.

As I arrive at the house, there are two men from the housing organisation that have come to fix something. “Does the dishwasher work?” asks one man. “No” says Binta. “Are you here to fix the lights”, I ask, “because none of them are working”. No, they are not. I don’t need to ask if they are here to fix the chairs as none of them are stable, the heater in the upstairs rooms, the broken window in the basement, the front door that opens with the wind, or the tap in the kitchen that has only dripping and no running water. They turn out to be here for only one thing; to stop a leakage that is bothering the neighbours.

“The refugee camp is a technology of care and control” (Malkki 1992:34). Above examples show however that it is equally budgets, organisations and neighbours that are cared for, by controlling refugees.

As well as space, also time is controlled. Appointments are made on behalf of refugees, without consulting them. House managers notify people once the appointment is made

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44) House rules may include: no alcohol, no people staying over without prior consent, and needing to be home before 23:00. The logic behind the deduction of pocket money is that housing organisations receive fines if they do not adhere to nationally-set standards around e.g. hygiene and quality of the interior, and therefore they need to ensure people in the house follow the rules.

45) There is a notable difference between the houses managed by different organisations. The apartments in the SPRAR are better maintained. Gallinaro is particularly bad, where there are not enough chairs for 26 people and almost everything is to some extent broken.
(usually a few days in advance) either by telling them directly or via the noticeboard. Sometimes such appointments give people something to do and other times people feel limited by, and revolt against such control.

Kadir shows me a photo sent by Mahmud of a handwritten note in Italian: “Mahmud and Kadir, legal appointment, 12pm”. He doesn’t know exactly what it means, other than showing up. The next day I pick him up, so he doesn’t have to take the bus at 7am. I stay for what turns out to be a group meeting about the changing immigration laws following the Salvini Decree. After the meeting, I am invited for lunch with the staff. I talk to Daniele, the psychologist, about the system for making appointments. She tells me that generally it works, but today one person did not show up, and another guy was angry because he had to cancel his plans.

Appointments can be rescheduled, but there are few plans that merit doing so. Football training, birthday parties, or even a small job can hardly be considered a valid reason for cancelling a lawyer, doctor or psychologist appointment. Asking someone if they ‘have time’, is a way of ensuring they have nothing planned. ‘To have’ however also means ‘to be in the possession of’. Asking whether someone has time is therefore also an acknowledgement and respect for the idea that it is the other who owns their own time.

There is also no control over payments. The prefettura of Frosinone is known to be months behind in payments to the housing organisations so employees’ salaries and refugees’ pocket money are also delayed. Even when it comes to work, refugees may start without knowing what they get paid or even without being paid at all. Getting paid ‘under the table’ (lavoro nero) is very common in Italy, even more so for immigrants (Istat 2018). However, immigrants are more often taken advantage of. They may be paid only one or two euros per hour, or not at all.

I receive a voice message from Amadou. There is no food because the women of the house, who are paid to do the cooking, are on strike. Anna, the cleaner is on strike with them. They have not been paid for more than 4 months. Amadou has called the police, they were going to come, but Gianni has called them off, saying that it is all under control. Indeed, under Gianni’s control it is.

“My wife died. I have a daughter, 16, she lives with my mother. She will go to university, she is clever. How am I supposed to support her if you try and work here but they don’t pay you? I went to the police once, but they simply say, ‘you don’t have a contract? Lavoro nero is illegal, so we cannot help you’.” – Berko

Living in a judicial system unknown to you, also gives a sense of being out of control. Some organisations support refugees in understanding their rights, obligations and changing laws. But even then, there is a lack of clarity around commission dates, an increased power of the police in dealing with refugees, and the power in general to stop anyone, anytime, anywhere for their documents. People live at the mercy of others.
“If anything happens to me here, that is not your fault. My parents are not here, this is not my country, who is going to help me? No one. If black you do something bad, they will deport you.” - Khalifa

A last aspect of a lack of control comes from the idea that European social norms are generally alien to refugees. I have seen people spitting on the ground, being on their phone while in company, or leaving their earphones in while speaking to others. These same people may go out of their way to show respect in a manner they are used to; greeting people on the street, sharing food, carrying a woman’s bags or showing excessive loyalty to people and agreements. Africans would reflect on how lowering your head is a sign of respect in Africa, whereas in Europe it would communicate the exact opposite. Navigating a social space when the tools for doing so have become invalid, thus becomes an effort in trying not to step on someone’s toes, without knowing how long the toes are or where someone has placed their foot. At a certain point, Amadou asked me if I could tell him whenever he does anything which people may frown upon. It shows that the sense of a lack of control comes, not necessarily from not knowing the social norms, but from not being able to learn the new social norms as people live their lives largely separate from Italians.

Revolt is the battle for gaining control and reinstating a sense of autonomy. The examples that were given of protests and non-participation may be considered ways to exert control over one’s own life. Demanding control is however possible only to a certain limit as people are ultimately stuck in a power trap where their asylum is always on the line.

It is towards the end of my stay. With a group of African guys I am in Arpino to watch Souleymane’s football match. We are heading to a café when a car slows down and stops. The man leans over the boy in the passenger seat, stares at Sidike and shouts “boo!” The guys are quiet. I am so shocked by the unnecessary inhumanity that I shout “boo” back at him. He laughs and I reply by loudly cursing at him and raising my middle finger. People look at us as the car drives away. The stupidity of my actions slowly dawns on me. If the man would have gotten out of the car and physically threaten me or them, it would have led to a fight in which they risk losing their asylum and discrediting the whole refugee community.

We are working on the visual guide in one of the top floor rooms; the only space in the house that is relatively quiet and relatively light. All of the sudden Gianni, the house manager, rams open the door. Amadou loses it – in French. “You need to knock, you can’t just open the door like that. This is my space. I need my freedom”, he says. “No freedom” Gianni responds. “This is not your house, this is camp. I need to know what’s going on”. Yaya responds more calmly, “I could be in my underwear or people may be sleeping. I have asked before if you could knock”. Then Gianni starts saying that we should be downstairs in the living room doing this work. And here is the trap. Gianni is in power. If he wants us to go downstairs where the table is sticky and the 26 people living here keep on moving in and out – then we have to, or he could deny me access to the house all together. He could even deduct from their pocket money if says they are breaking the rules.

The earphones are kept in not because they are playing music while in conversation, but because they are sending and receiving voice messages so regularly, that it is more comfortable to leave the earphones in.
With a lack of control comes a sense of dependence. Dependence is most clearly visible in relation to mobility. As none of the asylum seekers owned a car, and without a valid driver’s license, they navigate the area by foot, bike, with the limited bus network or the rare occasion to get picked up by a car. Walking and cycling limit where one can go as the mountainous and sparse region makes journeys long and physically tiring. It is hard to imagine or explain what a lack of a car does to a sense of freedom in this region. Italians are right when tell me: “the problem here is not transport, you can easily get to Rome or Naples by bus”. The sense of a lack of freedom comes the mismatch between bus timetables and people’s timetables. If you need to go to Italian class in the morning, you may not be able to come back on time to work in the afternoon. There are no buses in the evenings or on Sundays. Without people to fall back on, I heard of nights spent sleeping in the station as people missed the last bus at 7pm on a Saturday. Dependence is however also an invitation for others to take care of you. There are a few people who have taken up that responsibility by giving lifts, teaching Italian or giving small jobs. Even so, refugees are dependent on others’ timetables so that they become accustomed to putting their own needs and wishes second.

Despite the many obstacles, refugees travel around – some more than others. Their specific situation however means that they use the space differently from Italian residents. Italians would spend their time in the supermarket, shops, bars or restaurants, and in the weekend they may go skiing in the mountains, go to the sea, the lake or other villages. These activities would rarely be part of refugees’ lives, as they spend their money carefully, may neither ‘go for a coffee’ nor drink alcohol, do not do their own groceries, and are only able to go when and where the buses go (never on Sunday or in the evening). Even when refugees and Italians do spend time in the same place, they experience those places differently.

Together with a group of guys I organise a photowalk in their home village. They take turns in being the guide. I had thought we would go into the winding alleys, passed the olive oil barrels outside people’s houses, the different churches, the old community washing basin, and look at the family emblems on the different houses. This is the version of the town that was presented by Marcella as she gave me a tour on my first day. But they see and value this town differently as they lead us on the main road, straight out of the village. Koné starts photographing dogs and says “dogs are friends, because they help in the hunt. I used to have many dogs”. Sidike keeps on photographing the many iron gates and tells me he is a welder and he could make five of these a day. At a certain point there is nothing more to photograph than the road, an apt symbol of how they see this place; a road to somewhere else.

Those who interact little with Italians would know little about the place and therefore

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A group of 6 people were asked to photograph whatever catches their eye in an effort to see before thinking. After the photowalk, people selected the photos that were most meaningful to them and we discussed them in the group.
attribute meaning to it on the basis of their own experiences only. If people learn about the place they more often attribute meaning by combining a place’s historical and cultural significance with their own experiences.

“You know the second world war. Americans bombed here. This home was finished and the blast was here. You know the management was very wonderful because they saved this history and they saved the culture. You save the culture, you follow the culture, your life is very wonderful. You lost the culture, your life is not good. If you follow the other culture, you lose your culture, your parent’s cultures…” - Rana

During a full-day tour of Rana’s beloved Arpino I asked him if he would stay in Arpino. He seemed confused by the question and said “Arpino is a ‘hobby’ I will go wherever there is work”. Even as people learn about a place and attach meaning to it, place does not seem to provide a stable reference point in space.

It is not only physical space that refugees engage with differently than Italians, it is also social space. Despite being in Italy for more than two years, Amadou thought that the Italian name for coffee was Nescafé and that a cappuccino was only hot milk. The misunderstanding only came to light after some back and forth as we ordered coffee and he said “I do not like Nescafé so I want a cappuccino”. In another example Koné considered why the church bells sound every 15 minutes, if people do not actually come and pray. Italians know equally little about refugees’ lives. It happened several times that well-meaning Italians start speaking in broken English to someone who speaks Italian and above all, is from Francophone Africa. Events may be organised for (muslim) refugees, and yet they only serve alcohol or no one says that some of the sweets contain alcohol. The final performance for the dancetherapy class was planned in the first week of Ramadan. Yacouba confronted the teacher with this, but she said it is too late to change it. Only after I explained that it may mean people will not show up, did she take the effort to change it. Misunderstandings are understandable, it is their persistence which is symptomatic of the fact that Italians and refugees in the area live largely in isolation.

**Contact and pride**

Even as people make friends, are part of a football team or in another way meet Italians, their lives remain largely separate as a lack of mobility makes it difficult to grow and maintain new social contacts. Physical and social isolation thus go hand in hand. Furthermore, social isolation is both cause and consequence of a lack of Italian language skills, persisting stereotypes and a more general uncomfortableness with the non-European foreigner.
Until the Salvini Decree every refugee facility would have to facilitate language classes\textsuperscript{48}. The actual execution of these would differ a lot. The SPRAR would offer classes at walking distance from people’s houses, three times a week and with a specialised teacher. The CAS organisations give classes at their office in Sora, except for Gallinaro where there would no class at all, or only sporadically in the house. Not everyone goes to class. For some the only bus at 7am, and the hours of waiting in Sora before class starts, form an obstacle to going. Others say it is too difficult. This may have to do with the class’ common focus on writing exercises and complicated grammar rules while many African refugees are used to oral languages, do not have a writing culture and a few are even illiterate. Moreover, anyone who has learnt a new language knows it is mastered by practising it with others. Given the social isolation people therefore lack a real opportunity to learn Italian. Additionally, with the majority of asylum seekers having their asylum requests denied, or with the idea of continuing to another European country, learning Italian may seem pointless. Lastly, refugees say they do not go to class because they cannot focus as they worry about their families and their future.

Those unable to speak Italian face more than the inability to communicate. Miscommunication is common as people rely on others to translate or speak on their behalf. People told me that they received a negative decision from the commission because translators mistranslated crucial details of their story\textsuperscript{49}. A (perceived) lack of Italian is also an invite for others to speak on behalf of someone, ignore what someone is saying or all together pretend someone is not there.

I am at the evaluation of a youth employment project consisting of young Italians and migrants. People are asked to reflect on what they learnt about themselves that can help them in the future. It is a question explained in so many contradicting ways that also the Italians have difficulty answering it. Souleymane however really does not know what to say. An uncomfortable exchange follows in which different people try to explain to him what is meant and he tries to explain what he means. Eventually they simply ignore him and continue to the next person. At the end of the meeting, one of the mentors brushes Koné over his head. “Isn’t he good looking?” she asks me. Then she turns to Souleymane, “instead, Souleymane, he doesn’t laugh, he doesn’t speak”. But Souleymane does laugh and does speak, in any of the other 4 languages that he speaks.

Lost in translation gains a new meaning. Rather than it being about the meaning of a word that is lost, I see it now as the idea that a person is lost in between words. The words were only a gateway to the person, and when those words are uttered but not understood, it is the person who is misunderstood, misplaced, miscategorised.

\textsuperscript{48} After the decree a SPRAR is still expected to offer language classes, CAS structures are offered little to no budget to offer classes.

\textsuperscript{49} During the committee people have to state whether they agree with the particular interpreter that was assigned to them. At this stage they do not exactly know how good someone is at interpreting. After the meeting they receive (in Italian) the story they told the commission, and several people have told me that it includes crucial mistakes; referencing the wrong political party or not including the full story.
A sense of identity is formed through a process of recognising the self in others and having one’s self recognised by others (Leach 2002:287). A shared language as well as differentiating features such as nationality, ethnicity, language, class, culture, interests or education are ways for people to express and recognise themselves in others. For most refugees however, these features have become hidden, undervalued or invalid. People’s diplomas are generally not recognised, their skills may not be deemed relevant, they have lost their job and high levels of unemployment prevent people from creating a sense of identity around a new job. Hobbies like going out dancing, driving a motorcycle, painting, or even playing football are often difficult because of physical isolation. Lastly, their money is worth less in Europe, so that also wealth is not a way in which people can relate themselves to others. Differentiating features are further flattened under the label of immigrant that considers only one aspect of one’s identity; being an outsider.

Between refugees some differences continue to be acknowledged. People are often referred to by their country name, friendships are formed over shared nationality, those who are higher educated would be asked to check my consent form and people would make fun of each other’s ethnic identities. However, the hardships people endure, the refugee laws they are subjected to, and the homogenous treatment they receive from the Italian community means that these differences lose some of their meaning so that they cannot be a stable reference point for a sense of identity.

Physical and social isolation also makes it difficult to create a sense of community. They are not considered, and generally do not consider themselves part of the community in their village. There are forms of solidarity amongst refugees on the basis of shared hardships. It would however be too far of a stretch to call it a community. People greet each other on the street, make easy contact and conversation, but there is no shared tradition and the support network they may offer each other is usually contingent on other factors such as friendship or family ties. There is also little sense of community between housemates. Though people ‘hang out’ together, they only sometimes referred to any of the housemates as friends and rarely would people eat together; “of course not” said Thompson as I point this out, “we are not family’. Prayer creates a relation to God, but it does not anchor the self in relation to a religious community as few people manage to go to the mosque that is located in Cassino or Sora. Even for Christian refugees it may not be possible to become part of the local Christian community as buses do not drive on Sundays, and they are not always welcomed in church.

50 Though we are talking about recognition, they are features of differentiation as they allow people to differentiate themselves from some, in order to recognise themselves in others. Recognition and misrecognition are two sides of the same coin (Leach 2002:287).

51 For example, people call Mohamed ‘Somalia’, Dubaku ‘Burkina’ and Babajide ‘Cameroon’.

52 An exception may be Jehova witnesses. I heard several stories in which African refugees were actively ‘recruited’ by Jehova witnesses.
Their relation to communities in their home country has also ruptured as they struggle to be physically and financially present in the lives of their families.

Kwame got married seven months ago, remotely. He has met her before, but they weren’t going out. I ask why he married her. “Because you get married”, he says, “and because my mother is getting older. His father is at least a 100 years old, has two wives and cannot really take care of them anymore. The other wife has children who care for her, but Kwame’s sister is married and his brother is mentally not capable of taking care of their mother.

It is unclear whether people may recover some of these relationships in the future. ‘Italy Syndrome’ is a form of depression amongst East European migrant women who have returned home after working for decades in Italy and who need to face the fact that family members have died in their absence, their children have grown, and little attention is paid to the experiences they had in Italy (Mihala and Vinci 2019). There is a quote under a bridge when getting into Amsterdam central station that says “‘terugkomen is niet betzelfde als blijven’ (to return is not the same as to stay). I had always seen this as the idea that returning allows you to continue your life enriched by new experiences. By now I think of all the things that unravel if you don’t give them proper attention. Coming back may mean that people, things and whole lifeworlds have been lost. Returning then means to start anew, while staying would have meant to continue.

Being far away from their families and living in physical and social isolation, people use their phone to search and maintain contact with others. I chat with people over Whatsapp and see them writing others. Many times, not much is exchanged, no important or interesting information is shared. The purpose of this contact seems not to be the communication, but the connection, the assurance that someone is still there.

“To say buongiorno and then no one responds. Greeting people where we are from is a form of respect.” – Moustapha

I meet Rana for the first time as he is visiting a friend in Alvito. He shows me his phone, and the messages of good morning and good evening. “I want them to respond” he says. Sure enough, after I give him my number, every day, I receive a message wishing me good morning, good evening and happy Sunday (sometimes on a Saturday).

Social contact, physical contact, contact also means touch. It is easy to undervalue touch, or reduce it to the need for sexual contact, especially given the long period of abstention that most refugee men are compelled to. Touch is a vital physical need (Field 2010). We don’t just touch anyone, we touch people we are close (enough) to. As such it is a sign

53 Daniele, a psychologist at the housing organisation tells me that in her sessions people often complain of pain in their lower belly. To the discomfort of the interpreter for whom talking about sex is often a taboo, she tells the guys “you need to empty your scrotum. Go to a prostitute or masturbate”. Some people may do so, but many others say they cannot because of religious reasons. The abstention seems to be limited to men. Most women have semi-regular sexual contact. Within the refugee community, women are in the minority and so they can pick and choose their men.
of recognition, appreciation, respect. When we are be touched by the words, actions or bodies of others, we are assured not only that the other is there, but also that we are there, and that we are seen by the other. Perhaps the reason why an Italian contact is valued more in relation to belonging than contact within the refugee community, is precisely because it counters the more common experience of being unseen, unappreciated and disrespected.

I am interviewing a group of mediatori (interpreters) who have been here for more than 10 years. “I feel most at home when I have people around me, to exchange ideas, have dinner nights”, Moustapha says. I ask if it has to be with Italians or if can be any group of people. “No, it has to be with Italians, then I feel most at home, because I feel less of a foreigner. Also, when I am part of someone’s family, or with colleagues, and joking with people, then I feel less of a foreigner. Even though you will always be a foreigner”.

“We go outside. You are nice. You know the African culture, you know how we Africans behave. Even if you give me nothing, it makes me proud of myself.” - Amadou

As a female researcher there are limits to how much I can talk to men about love, intimacy, touch and contact. Rather than providing answers, I can really only raise a question: what would it mean to live for years on end, without people physically around that love you and that you can love back; that touch you and hold you, and that you can touch and hold back?

This section has revealed an entangled web of experiences, rules, mechanisms and coping mechanisms which show the many ways in which people have lost the stable reference points provided by identity, community, place and time that anchor a sense of belonging.

The film includes a song by Italian-Egyptian singer Mahmood. During my stay he won “San Remo”, Italy’s prestigious music competition. It led to heated debates on immigration in the news and on social media.

22:14 - 23:10
LOST AS BELONGING

Lost

“as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (...) [T]hrough some magic trick, [the table may] vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible" (Arendt 1958:53,53)

We may see identity, community, place and time as the table that, when it is taken away, makes it impossible to relate to the world around us in any stable manner - the world presents itself as unknown. Though geographically located in Valle di Comino, the space that refugees inhabit is a terra incognita. As long as this landscape remains unknown, people engage with it in a sense of lost. Losing someone and something, feeling lost, lost in translation, losing oneself, losing control or losing in general. In the first instance lost may be seen as a negative notion. After all, I generally lose things because I am careless and inattentive, I often get lost because I have a bad sense of direction, and when I lose a game it is because I was playing badly. Upon closer inspection there are also positive connotations. Losing track of time, or losing yourself in a book or a moment. Being lost in a place also invites for exploration and attention to the environment. The experience of lost can be one of fear, but also one of strength, knowing that there is no one to rely on but yourself, and it may give rise to feelings of faith and trust as people rely on God.

Being lost is often met with efforts of trying to find one’s way, so that losing and finding, getting lost and surviving are two sides of the same coin. Understood as such, the word lost can do justice to both the struggle of navigating the unknown, and the many ways that people successfully work through this struggle.

Lost may not resonate with all of the research participants. Firstly, denying a sense of being lost is for some a survival technique in itself. Social media would be full of pictures of fancy cars, beautiful outfits and big parties. One person in specific, only wanted me to film in situations that he considered respectable, like playing football, being with friends or working. Secondly, there are people who relatively quickly and easily find their way and create a world less unknown, held together by anchors that (to some limited extent) ground themselves in space and time. Whether or not people are able to do so depends on

54) In recognition of the value of being lost, Rebecca Solnit (2006) wrote a whole fieldguide on getting lost.
55) All the refugees I worked with were to some extent religious, either Muslim or Christian.
their own character. Those with an abnormal amount of courage, charm, energy or skills transferable to European society, may do better in creating a sense of belonging. It also depends on one’s environment. Those who are part of a SPRAR, a committed CAS, who have kind neighbours or inspiring housemates are generally given more tools to navigate the unknown. The argument is not that refugees in Valle di Comino are necessarily and always lost. Instead, the point is that they cannot but relate to a world that presents and continues to present itself as unknown, and if they manage to avoid being lost it is despite the world they live in, not thanks to it.

Belonging relates to connectedness, having a place, having anchors that keep you in place and that allow you to navigate through the world and its many demands. Lost is not having any anchors, not knowing what is expected, not knowing where you are and not having a compass that gives a sense of direction. Lost and belonging are in many, perhaps all ways exact opposites. Thus, if people engage with the world in a sense of being lost, and if lost is the opposite of belonging, then it should be concluded that people do not belong. Indeed, most people do not belong in the place there are in, or with the people they are with. However, not-belonging was defined as a sense of not-being-the-world, a sensation that one’s existence does not matter. Some people, in some specific instances, may feel a sense of not-belonging. The most extreme evidence of this would be people committing suicide when they receive a negative response from the commission\textsuperscript{56}. Spending whole days in bed, being unwilling to go out, or when referring to feelings of loneliness, being nobody or without purpose may also signal a sense of not-belonging. There may be even more moments and more people who feel this way, but that do not express it in such a way. However, to conclude that the majority of people feel a sense of not being-in-the-world would not do justice to the effort, energy, courage and struggle that most people deliver on a daily basis to cope with the fact that they wake up for nothing.

Thus, most refugees do belong, but they also engage with the world in a sense of being lost. In this context, for belonging to make sense at all, it needs to be understood as ‘belonging in the sense of being lost’, or simply put: lost as belonging. It means that people generally still have temporality, spatiality, personality and sociality, but that these are not grounded in specific time, place, identity or community.

\textsuperscript{56} There are many examples, in and beyond Italy. For example in October 2018 (Hutter 2018).
Belonging

In a state of being lost, people’s identities have become fluid, which allows them to use their identity strategically to become whatever or whomever, whenever it is needed. This process takes place within the limits of one’s personality. Personality, rather than one’s identity, are a more common way in which people understand themselves. Yacouba refers to himself as *Napolitano* (someone from Naples) in moments in which he considers himself strong, courageous or good\(^{57}\). Amadou is explaining his behaviour on the basis of his ‘*gros cœur*’ (big heart) which he says compels him to help others, but can also make him angry especially when trying to protect the honour of others.

Though people may not be anchored in communities, they do engage in social groups that temporarily hold together. For example, watching or playing football together, sharing tea, or being part of a particular project. Moreover, there is a sense of solidarity on the basis of shared hardships which leads to a kind of sociality amongst the group of refugees. Though people may not be physically part of a community, they tend to keep some kind of position in remote communities through their phone. Here, the relation to other community members is mediated by non-humans; by the voice of the loudspeaker, the stutters of the internet and the emotions of emoticons.

Some people manage to attribute meaning to the particular place they live in. Most people however consider themselves still en route. It is unclear when and if this will really change. The mediatori I interviewed, who have a job, friends and a life in Italy, still do not consider themselves to belong to Italy properly. They have worked and lived in many other European countries, and would consider moving as soon as there are better opportunities elsewhere. For as long as people live in a world that lacks stable reference points, people’s place is being out of place – at home in movement.

Time forms reference points that help us to decide what we need to do and where we are supposed to go next. We may say, working days are for work, and weekend days are for rest; around thirty you should be married; on a Friday you go to the mosque and at midnight you go to bed. For many refugees however, these specific marks of time have lost or changed meaning as they do not work, cannot go to the mosque, and they may keep the shutters closed and sleep throughout the day so that day and night start to merge. There is temporality, but not defined by the rhythmic beat of clocks and calendars, but the arrhythmic pace of phone notifications, infrequent work, unexpected appointments.

\(^{57}\) Napels is considered a rough city, a character which presumably extends to its residents. Calling someone Napolitano is not a common expression in Italian. Yacouba only started saying it because he has the same last name as someone in the Napoli football team. Yacouba uses in the context of: “I am strong because I am Napolitano”, “I can help because I am Napolitano” or if someone compliments him he would say “Yes, I know, I am Napolitano”.

Church bells ring every 15 minutes in Italy - day and night - to indicate the time. For example 9.45, is 9 times one bell, and 3 times a higher pitched bell.

31:00 - 31:45
or the daily changing times of prayer. As well as rhythm, time has also lost its linearity. In everyday language we may talk about leaving the past behind, looking forward to the future, and being present in the present. Waiting in time we might understand as linearity that has temporarily flattened before it will continue its course. However, the many examples have shown that as people are waiting, time becomes mashed up, as the past and future are constantly nagging the present so that people cannot be present.

58 For example as we see Amadou processing the humiliating experience of being imprisoned in Libya, or the many instances in which people say their thoughts are haunting them, preventing them from learning the language.
GETTING OUT OF TERRA INCognita

This text has been working with three dense concepts; terra incognita, lost and belonging. Terra incognita was presented as the geographical, ethical and epistemological unknown of both Valle di Comino and the lives of refugees living there. As we moved through the area, met its residents and became acquainted with the lives of the new residents, the unknown turned into the known. Meanwhile, terra incognita gained a new meaning as that place to which refugees belong. A place that cannot be found on any map and only emerges if you engage with the people inhabiting it. Here nothing is stable enough to become a point of reference. Its ontological state is change and therefore its epistemological character is unknowability. It means that if you engage with terra incognita, which is what this research has done, and what refugees are doing every day, it is not necessarily turned into terra cognita. People generally engage with such a world in a state of being lost, a term that harbours many meanings that include both feelings of lost and techniques for survival. In terra incognita, identity, place, community and time are constantly changing to the extent that it makes no sense to talk about these concepts as axes along which feelings of belonging are negotiated. Not-belonging was defined, not as the absence of any or all of these axes, but as an anxiety that one's existence does not matter. Sometimes or for some, navigating terra incognita in a mode of being lost may cause such a state of existential despair. In other moments or for other people being lost simply becomes the way of belonging. This belonging is not negotiated anymore along the axes of identity, community, place and time, but is characterised by indeterminacy and possibility as people move in the arenas of personality, sociality, spatiality and temporality.

The instability that defines terra incognita follows from being placed in depopulating villages, being subject to refugee law and mechanisms, and being a non-European foreigner more generally. As such, some insights may be valid beyond the case of being placed in depopulating areas, or even beyond the case of refugees. At the same time the analysis is

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59 The idea here is that something needs to be something, before it can be known as being that thing. As a philosophical statement this could easily be challenged, as it may be argued that everything is always in a process of change, or that ontology and epistemology cannot be taken apart like that as things come into existence by knowing it. Here, however it is taken as the empirical observation that people's identities, places, communities and sense of time changes so frequently that they themselves cannot get a grip on it and therefore cannot get to know it.

60 It could be argued that these concepts are stable for no one. In fact, it is because they are unstable that there is such a thing as a politics of belonging. The crucial element is not the first half of the sentence, but the second half; the idea that they are so unstable that it is not meaningful to talk about them as modes along which belonging is shaped.

61 The absence of these axes may trigger, but they do not define not-belonging.
more limited. Through the text, film and guide I have tried to create the landscape that refugees inhabit. How people exactly inhabit this world is essentially down to the person. Rather than it being a limitation to the research, it is a reminder of the uniqueness of people and experiences. The text has set out and substantiated the overall argument. The guide locates the refugees in Valle di Comino and makes the world they have created intelligible. The film shows a world of confusion, where few things make sense, and one can only expect the unexpected – an impossible task. Together they create terra incognita, while showing the many ways people navigate it.

The only way to get out of terra incognita is if aspects of life start to become stable again. Perhaps a meaningful job with a permanent contract, an Italian partner or anything else that ties one’s self to a specific place and specific others. For some people it has already happened, and for some others it might never happen. We can also ask ourselves, as visitors to terra incognita, how do we get out from here? It is a question I have been struggling with ever since I returned. On the basis of Fabian’s dialectical approach, I was taught to think in terms of a communicative context; a totality that does not allow for the distinction between praxis and theory, field and home (1971:35). However, to think through why coming home had been so difficult I need the, albeit problematic distinction between home and field.

I entered the field by taking a plane, and then a car, and somewhere, I’d say between Sora and Gallinaro did I cross the boundary. But something odd happened. Those same boundaries became blurred, soft, like oil spreading everywhere, so that by the time I left, they were no longer there to cross. Instead of a confined physical space, the field has taken up space in me. In my heart, but also in my mind. Yet, it is a void space because the people are not filling it. Holes also take up space - a space of nothing. If the field is now ‘inside’ me, the only way to ‘get out’, would be to forget. The Dutch ontzien is apt here. It has the grammatical structure of ‘to unsee’, but the meaning of ‘turning a blind eye’. And that is precisely what we cannot do. There is an epistemological and ethical duty not to get out by way of forgetting. Too often life is made up of milestones, that we reach and tick off before we move on – unchanged and unchallenged. Perhaps some things should change us and we should allow them to change us by letting them take up space within us.

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62 Other limitations include firstly, the fact that the research was conducted in the winter months where people use space differently. In summer more things are organised in the villages, people go outside more, and migrants and Italians would be using (though not necessarily interacting in) the same public space. Secondly, I have spent relatively equal amounts of time with men and women so that the research insights represent both their experiences. However, to draw out the differences I would have needed to spend more time with the women alone, something that this research did not allow for. Lastly, whenever refugees would speak non-European languages together, I would not be able to understand them which means that some of the ways that they interact with each other were missed.


Balibar, Étienne. 2004. We, the People of Europe. Princeton: Princeton University Press.


Attached as separate files:

**Loglist**

An extended version of the loglist that includes the different tags that were used to make the materials accessible and intelligible. The same tags are used in Lightroom from where I could also filter visually. See footnote 13.

**Consent forms**

The consent forms, adjusted to give research participants more guarantees, and more control over what is recorded. See footnote 19.