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Exceeding Crisis. The Psychic Life of Drawings

Since 2015, an unprecedented number of people from Middle Eastern and African countries have crossed borders into and within Europe. Media and political actors describe this time as an "emergency" and a "crisis" that challenges the core of European values and human rights principles. Calling this a crisis implies responding to it, on the one hand, with humanitarian gestures of saving lives, and, on the other, with stricter border control. I reflect on the grammar of crisis and the forms of care that it simultaneously enables and disables. I am inspired by the relationship between two painters—from Tunisia and Nigeria—and their forms of therapeutic and ethical explorations through art. I propose to attend to practices that bear witness to other grammars, or the lack thereof. These practices are the expression of a denial, or, better, of an interruption in the language of the crisis and pathology. [crisis, refusal, Bartleby, creativity, transitional object]

The numbers of people from Middle Eastern and African countries crossing borders into and within Europe from the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and other European entry points have drastically increased since 2015. The deaths resulting from such crossings have also multiplied, often turning the images of borders and seas into cemeteries of people on the move. This time has been described by the media, the nation states, and various political actors as an "emergency" and a "crisis" that challenges the very core of European values and human rights principles. The statistics that result from such movements have turned migration into a metric of crisis where Europe figures as a "civilization" currently in a "state of crisis" (Davis 2015).[1] If migration has become a metric of crisis, crisis has become a narrative device (Koselleck 2002; Roitman 2014) that allows for certain questions to be posed and others to be foreclosed. Framing this time as such implies approaching the present moment as a state of emergency that activates the different functions and modalities of sovereign power. European nation-states and supra-national organizations are mobilized to simultaneously save and care for lives in need of rescue, on the one hand, and to enforce stricter border control, on the other. Both postures of sovereign power are framed within a grammar of life that identifies certain events as worth accounting for and as crisis producing, and others as ordinary, thus uneventful and unaccountable (Povinelli 2011). In this context, there is a push on the part of people

on the move to subvert this very grammar and the ways in which sovereign power translates the fluidity of experience into stable categories.

In this article, I reflect on experiences that don't quite fall within the language of crisis. They are the expression of a denial, or, better, of an interruption of this very language. I argue that these forms of experiencing belong to the performativity of creation and the potential that is exemplified by the gesture of Melville's character, Bartleby, when he says: "I would prefer not to." I draw from a new project on art and theater that I am conducting in Siracusa, Sicily, with African youth who, according to the law, qualify as "unaccompanied foreign minors" and are currently waiting to be recognized as refugees in Italy.[2] It is a project on practices that function in the register of bearing witness to other grammars, or as a response to the lack thereof, outside the register of the eventful. While the stories of selfhood that are crafted when people identify themselves before a court of law to obtain documents follow the register of the exceptional and the tragic (Giordano 2014; Ticktin 2011), many of the silent and affective responses of those who don't meet the requirements of the crisis narrative—and its categories—fall within the rubric of ordinary experience and diffuse suffering that cannot be rendered in any institutional or humanitarian language. A criminal justice system that is set up to recognize only scripted voices of human trafficking or asylum seeking as worthy of being restored to a new political life ceaselessly misunderstands those grammars that do not fit into the categories of recognition of the political lexicon of emergency.

I think with two painters who I met in Italy, and consider the forms of explorations that they do through art. One is a man in his early 40s who moved to Italy from Tunisia around 20 years ago and has since become a political figure of Siracusa; the other is a young man from Nigeria who arrived in Italy two years ago, when he was 17, by boat. I attend to their encounters through the register of the therapeutic. Here, therapy does not refer to the therapy of symptoms, but rather to an ethics—or an exploration of the potentialities of life—that takes form within or/and outside the grammar of the nation-state and, in the context of contemporary migrations to Europe, of humanitarian interventions.

Grammars

The grammar of power mobilizes specific categories—crisis, asylum seeker, refugee, among others—that elicit specific stories from those who cross borders in order to grant different forms of humanitarian protection, or to enforce repatriation. By grammar here, I don't mean merely the set of abstract rules for correctly speaking a language, or the syntactic and semantic use of words and sentences. I draw from Ludwig Wittgenstein's work (1958) a broader and more elusive understanding of grammar as a set of norms that are used and practiced within specific language-games and the forms of life that are thus produced. Such norms are interwoven with the fabric of life, and don't merely guide the abstract use of language. As Wittgenstein wrote: "[. . .] the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (1958, 23). He calls linguistic practices 'language-games' because he sees the relations between grammar and language as similar to the rules of a game to the game itself. He thus makes a powerful analogy between speaking a language and playing a

game. He further reflects on the similarities between a game and a form of life; they both function from within the perimeter of what can be said and done to make sense and create agreement (and disagreement) among the community of players/speakers. For him, games are not arbitrarily ruled by norms that could, in another context, be substituted by other equally arbitrary rules. Although language-games have usually been interpreted as different conventions (or cultures), Italian philosopher Silvana Borutti argues (1993) that in Wittgenstein's work, language-games don't form different epistemes of the world, but ontologically different forms of life.

In Wittgenstein's idea of grammar, rules and norms are the entanglements and practices that produce worlds. Thus, epistemic cultures are produced by discourses and power, to which the subject responds (Butler 1997; Foucault 1991). But, in Wittgenstein's view, the subject is "an enactment" of their grammars (Nelson 2009; Whitmarsh 2014) and not just an artifact of institutions, cultures, and their discourses. Language-games reveal life in a specific form. They are the result of repetition and are ontologically constitutive of the life form that holds and creates them in the first place. Understood in this framework, Wittgenstein argues: "Grammar tells [us] what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)" (Wittgenstein 1958, 371, 373). That is, theology is a grammar wherein God figures as one of the objects of contemplation and knowledge.

Similarly, one can argue that sovereign and bureaucratic powers, as well as other forms of knowledge, are grammars that translate experience into their language-games that, in turn, sustain specific worlds/forms of life. In psychiatric practice, for instance, the DSM provides a language that is also a grammar that interprets symptoms and suffering through stable diagnostic categories. In the context of contemporary migrations, different state apparatuses and laws translate people crossing borders into specific categories of recognition that correspond to predetermined subject positions. Grammars make object and subject positions intelligible; some entities become objects while others are constituted as subjects. What falls outside a form of life and its grammar belongs to the realm of the unsayable and untranslatable, thus exceeding the very syntax that makes certain objects, subjects, and actions recognizable. It is this realm beyond the sayable and translatable that I am interested in here, specifically when the language-game is one of crisis.

To think about crisis as a form of life with its own specific language game, if you will, implies approaching it as a set of rules and norms that organize the ways in which events become understandable and knowable. Within the grammar of crisis, movement, borders, and the events attached to them become specific kinds of objects of knowledge, with specific trajectories and outcomes. For example, the movement of people crossing the sea and other national borders becomes a form of migration and those who move become known through various subject positions and categories that make up such grammar: asylum seeker, refugee, economic migrant, victim of human trafficking, clandestine, trafficker, and unaccompanied foreign minor (Giordano 2014). Italian government agencies and NGOs working in the field of migration are often invested in eliciting victim stories from asylum seekers or people who might qualify as victims of human trafficking. In doing this in and through these language-games, people are asked to tell and to speak their stories in a specific victim register eliciting specific types of recognition

(Giordano 2015). In this way, the grammar of crisis tells us what kind of subjects are represented through these categories and what disciplinary practices are needed for their management. In the grammar of crisis, there is little room for opacity in the story one tells to the state (Demos 2009).

The etymology of the term crisis comes from the ancient Greek *krino,* which means to separate, to choose, to decide, and to cut. Intrinsic to the term is the requirement of a final judgment, a definite decision. Historically, crisis has had an important role in the domains of law, theology, and medicine, but by the 5th and 4th centuries BC, its medical meaning prevailed. In the medical grammar, crisis meant a turning point of a disease—not the disease itself—or a critical phase that called for a radical decision because life and death were at stake. It pointed to the sudden change in the course of events, an unexpected situation that, for its gravity, called for judgment, action, and intervention (Koselleck 2002). However, if crisis once signified a decisive moment, it is now broadly used to signify a condition of ongoing struggle and enduring turmoil. The urgency of the sudden overturning—a shift from one state to another—has given way to the temporality of the *long durée* and of the ongoing everyday unfolding of events as simultaneously persistent (or regular) and yet still urgent, thus demanding action. Crisis, in other words, has developed into an oxymoron (Roitman 2014) that condenses temporalities usually understood as opposite: the immediate present of the critical moment, and the unfolding time of duration.

In the context of the current refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and Europe, the routinization and bureaucratization of humanitarian interventions have produced a sense of chronicity wherein the immediacy of the emergency is constantly translated into the long duration of a persistent condition through procedures of rescue performed within the framework of a recurring state of exception (Agamben 1998). The crisis as emergency continues beyond the point of arrival, as those who have landed become part of a growing unrecognized workforce in the agricultural fields in the south of Italy for whom the thresholds between legality and illegality, life and death, no longer exist (Giordano 2016, 2019).

As a narrative form, crisis is punctuated by events, causes and effects, trajectories, and disruptions that must unfold in chronological time such that what doesn't reveal itself in linear time is ahistorical, remains noneventful, and is thus unreal (de la Cadena 2015, 149). Within the grammar of crisis, experience needs to be reframed as "events"—as extraordinary, something that can be contained, as exceptional. In this sense, crisis reinforces the idea of historicism (Chakrabarty 2000; Knight and Stewart 2016) in which the archive—understood as a process of writing and documenting—is central to defining what counts as an event to be recorded and preserved. It is through archival practices that a specific grammar is solidified, and events are seen as specific objects of knowledge. As asylum seekers or refugees, people are required to present their experiences in the format of a life story of tragic events, ordered in chronological sequences, with causes for leaving and consequences to the journey—i.e., in ways that fit the grammar of crisis. What happens, then, when the stories do not fit, or exceed, this frame?

Amadou, a young man from Gambia, told me in the Summer of 2017 after applying for asylum and being interviewed by the commission appointed to decide on his status: "People like us don't have stories." I knew he had many compelling

stories to tell because we had worked on a theater project together, sharing stories of different kind. But the words he used before the commission did not appear as eventful. They did not add up to an account worthy of the crisis archive. As an "unaccompanied foreign minor," he was automatically under the protection of the United Nation convention on the rights of children, which prohibits any receiving states to deport minors to their countries of origins. But, to be granted legal recognition and access to services and rights after his 18th birthday, Amadou also needed the official status of refugee or of humanitarian protection, which would extend his legal status into adulthood. Hence, he had to appear before a commission that judged his specific case. He talked about being poor and hungry and wanting to continue studying; about being sad that his father had lost his job, and couldn't provide for the rest of the family; about being 17 with no prospect of finding a job nor a school to go to. His words revealed fragments of ordinariness that didn't conform to the crisis-grammar. He did, indeed, lack the story that the state required to grant him refugee status. Rather than reading this as a case of omission and oversight, I want to ask what remains as a way of relating to experience when it exceeds or simply refuses the crisis-grammars that are in place for people like Amadou. I turn to the aesthetic form, noting that not everything can—or should— be put into words. Or, in the spirit of Bartleby, what can be experienced or glimpsed when the only words are "I'd prefer not to"?

Enter the Artists and Their Paintings

Ramzi is an educator, cultural mediator, artist, activist, and my friend. He is a citizen of Siracusa who moved from Tunisia over 20 years ago. He runs an intercultural and interfaith center and works with different institutions as a translator and social worker around issues of immigration and integration. We met on an early morning in August 2015, as I was walking around the old part of town, Ortigia, and he was setting up his art installation in a square. We became fast friends and started thinking together about projects around movement and borders. The following summer, we decided to do a theater workshop with a group of young African men, and I was there to develop it with him.

On an unusually hot summer morning, Ramzi and I left Siracusa to drive to a shelter for unaccompanied foreign migrants located inland, an hour from the coast, where he worked as a cultural broker for the doctor on duty. The shelter was in an old residence/hotel in the middle of nowhere: a reception structure that hosted foreign minors who were waiting to apply for papers or file for asylum. At the time, it hosted 136 people, only young men. In itself, it was a pleasant site. The surrounding fields of cacti and orange trees punctuated the otherwise desert-like landscape with dots of intense green. The location was isolated, with no public transportation available. To walk to the closest village, several miles away, one had to cross open fields in the plain sun, or walk along the same interstate road we used to get there, also known as *la strada della morte* (the death road) because of the number of accidents that happen there. When we arrived, there were young men playing table football on the porch, others were in the big hall at the entrance watching TV, others were walking in and out of the back doors, aimlessly. A police van was parked outside, surrounded by policemen chatting with one another. One

of them walked toward Ramzi to ask him who I was. I was not allowed to be there without police clearance, but he explained I was his driver. In this way, as he put it, he had "smuggled" me in. He enjoys doing this kind of thing, and so do I.

The doctor, a man in his late 50s, arrived exhausted and disoriented. It was his first day of work at the shelter. Ramzi led him inside his office and put some chairs in the corridor, so that I and those who wanted to see the doctor could sit and wait. Young men from Ghana, Gambia, Mali, Senegal, and Nigeria gathered outside the doctor's office. They were all talkative. They showed pictures and short videos of their rapping sessions on their cell phones. One of them performed a rap song for us. They talked about the camp and how they didn't like being there: "It is too far from everything." They complained they had nothing to do during the day. They wanted to do sports, play soccer. The sole regular activity was Italian lessons a couple of hours a week.

The wait was long. I started showing them pictures on my cell phone. I had several photos of Ramzi's paintings and installation. For several weeks that summer, he and other local artists exhibited their work in an empty unconsecrated church, the Chiesa di Gesú Maria, in old Ortigia. Entitled "Uprooted," the exhibit displayed art work around the experience of movement and borders. Ramzi had his paintings of boats of people crossing seas, and an installation—entitled "Museo dei sogni frantumati" (museum of the fractured dreams)—of the remnants of a boat and various objects that once belonged to those who crossed and that were washed ashore (photos #1 and #2). Boats are a recurrent theme in his paintings. I spent several summer evenings in the company of his work and of the passersby who stopped to look at it. The paintings are poetic in their simplicity and repetition, and his work is conscientious and skillful in the use of images that evoke the journeys on overcrowded vessels. His art engages the language of crisis—without necessarily undoing it—by translating experience into images of the crossing, with the awareness that there is a market for it. His playfulness with the grammar of crisis, though, is important because it opens up art's potential to exceed it, something I will return to in the second part of the article. Ramzi knows that the refugee crisis has brought "academic and humanitarian tourism to Sicily," as he put it, and that it is "a great resource" for the island. François Koltès (photo #3), a French artist and collector, made an installation as part of the same exhibit entitled "La marche de l'abysse" (The walk by the abyss) composed of papier mâché bodies, hanging from the ceiling, and forming a disordered line of what resembled walking corpses. The idea behind his installation was that of a museum of the future exhibiting the bodies—or the ghostly remnants—of those who died during the crossing of the Mediterranean.[3]

As I showed my pictures, one of the young men started telling me about one of his friends at the camp who was a very talented artist. He ran up to the room they shared and came back with several drawings of what looked like an elaborate cartoon story. We were all looking at them when Victor, the author, joined us and started talking about them. He and I became involved in a very animated conversation about drawing, art, painting, and sculpture. I showed him photos of Alberto Burri's work and told him about *arte povera* and the use of various materials—such as wood, tar, jute, plastic—to make paintings. He told me about the cartoons sequence that he was developing; it was entitled "Guardian Angel" (photos #4 and #5). Set in northern Italy, his cartoons told the story of a spider-man-looking character whose

Photo #1.   "Uprooted" series, Ramzi Harrabi, Siracusa, Italy, July 2016. Photo by the author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

main mission was to protect and rescue an Italian woman who had been betrayed by her employer, kidnapped, and threatened with death. He already had 40 pages of detailed drawings and was about to write the text in English to later have it translated into Italian. He was a very prolific cartoonist, but his dream was to learn how to paint, he told me with a hint of shyness.

Later in the day, when the doctor's consultations were over, I introduced him to Ramzi, who was impressed by Victor's drawings. He asked him whether he was interested in drawing some images about his journey to Italy, the crossing from Nigeria to Libya, and of the Sicilian channel into Italy. He thought, as he later told me, that Victor could use his skills as an artist and his identity as a migrant to make some money, in the same vein of his own boat paintings and installation. He quickly envisioned Victor working for the tourists in the streets of Siracusa, making drawings of his migration, and thus capitalizing on his position as a foreigner. As an educator, Ramzi saw the political potential of art, reworking the categories of power to his own advantage. The work did not undo the very grammar that produced them; instead it resituated his relationship to its power. He could "game" the grammar, so to speak. Victor said that he really wanted to learn how to paint. Ramzi was willing to pay him some money if he made drawings that fit his exhibit on migration at the church. Victor was elusive and didn't commit to it. Ramzi insisted,

Photo #2.   "Museo dei sogni frantumati," installation by Ramzi Harrabi, Siracusa, Italy, July 2016. Photo by the author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

but, in the end, Victor said he'd rather not draw his journey. After much back and forth, Ramzi gave up and agreed to teach him how to paint instead.

I was intrigued by Victor's refusal. The images of multitudes of people disembarking from boats, being rescued at sea, walking along railways, or cutting through walls of wire have completely colonized Europe's social imaginary and turned movement and borders into a media spectacle (Fernando and Giordano 2016). These images fit a grammar of crisis and catastrophe—both representations that sovereign power colonizes so that the present appears as something it can deal with by using special powers granted during a state of emergency. By declining to represent his journey as a migrant, Victor took a position that, for me, partially resonated with Melville's character, Bartleby the scrivener, who abstains to perform what he is supposed to do by saying: "I'd prefer not to."

Bartleby's character has been a source of interest for many who have attempted to interpret, understand, define, and capture his essence (Agamben 1999; Deleuze 1998; Hardt and Negri 2000; Zizek 2006). He is one of the scriveners employed at a lawyer office to transcribe legal documents. He is quiet and efficient and attends to his tasks diligently and with precision until the day his employer asks him to run

Photo #3.   "La marche de l'abysse," installation by François Koltès, Siracusa, Italy, July 2016. Photo by the author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

an errand outside the office and he replies: "I'd prefer not to." Taken aback but intrigued by Bartleby's response, the lawyer doesn't fire him and instead becomes obsessed by his answer. Bartleby continues to work at the lawyer's office (one suspects he actually lives there day and night), but always replies he'd prefer not to do whatever task he is asked to perform. His response disorients his colleagues and the lawyer, but they all gradually become affected by it, and start answering in similarly ways. As a figure, Bartleby exceeds any definition (Beverungen and Dunne 2007). He stops performing tasks by stating "I'd prefer not to," but he nonetheless continues to work at the office; he is a scrivener, even when he stops transcribing; he is not apathetic even if he doesn't perform any of the duties and responsibilities attached to this position. His behavior creates an interruption not only in the usual flow of activities, but also in the sense of who Bartleby is. The statement—"I'd prefer not to"—opens up the possibilities of other subject positions, experiences, and actualities. Bartleby dwells in the potential of what could be, wandering in the space in between categories and statuses.

By saying "I would prefer not to," both Bartleby and Victor produce an interruption in the speech of power, an abnormality in its grammar that potentially spoils its signifying force. Ramzi's idea of how to use experience to do art and simultaneously occupy an active subject position vis-à-vis the language of the state is caught within the same logic of the crisis and the kind of capital that is inscribed in it. The interruption produced by "I would prefer not to," suspends the biopolitical order,
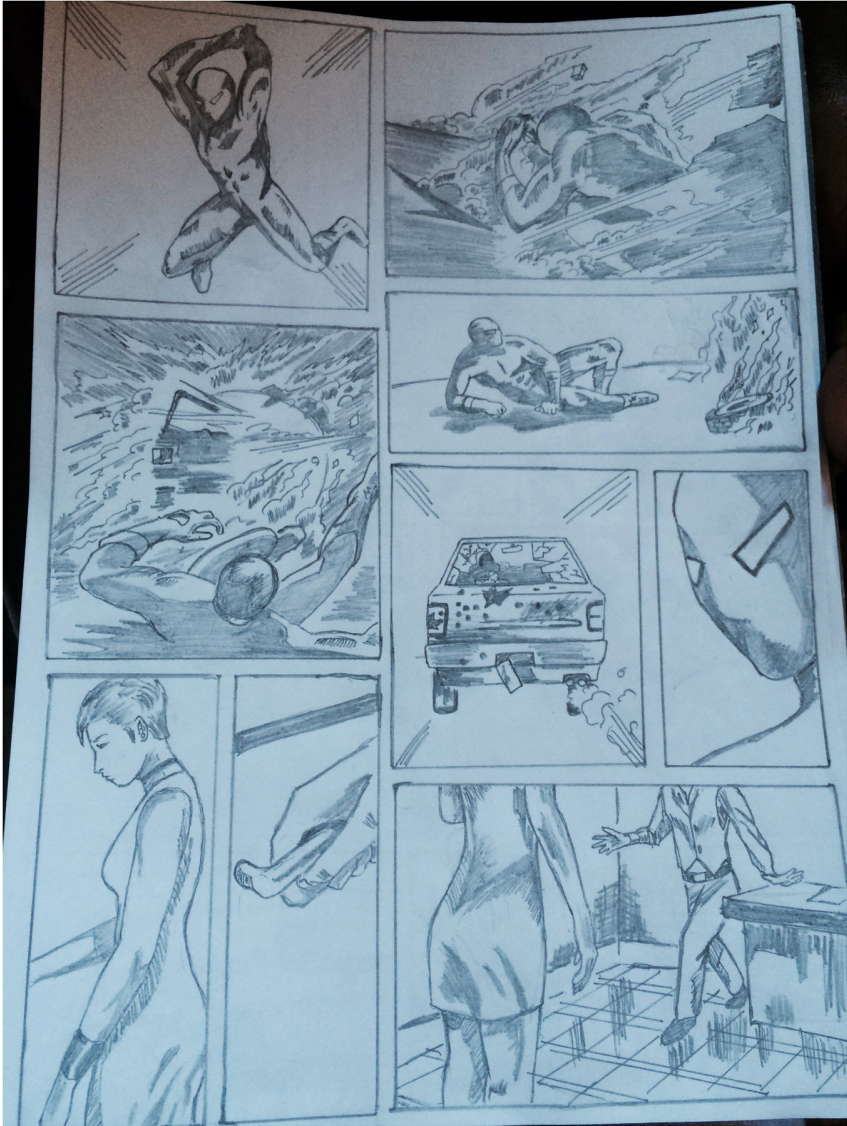
Photo #4.   "The Guardian Angel." Drawing by Homiex, photo by the author.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue]

and something else unfolds in the in-between of pure potentiality. Victor's "no" is
the occasion and source of creation. Or, at least, this is how I heard his reply to
Ramzi's invitation.

   In the weeks and months that followed that encounter at the shelter, Victor
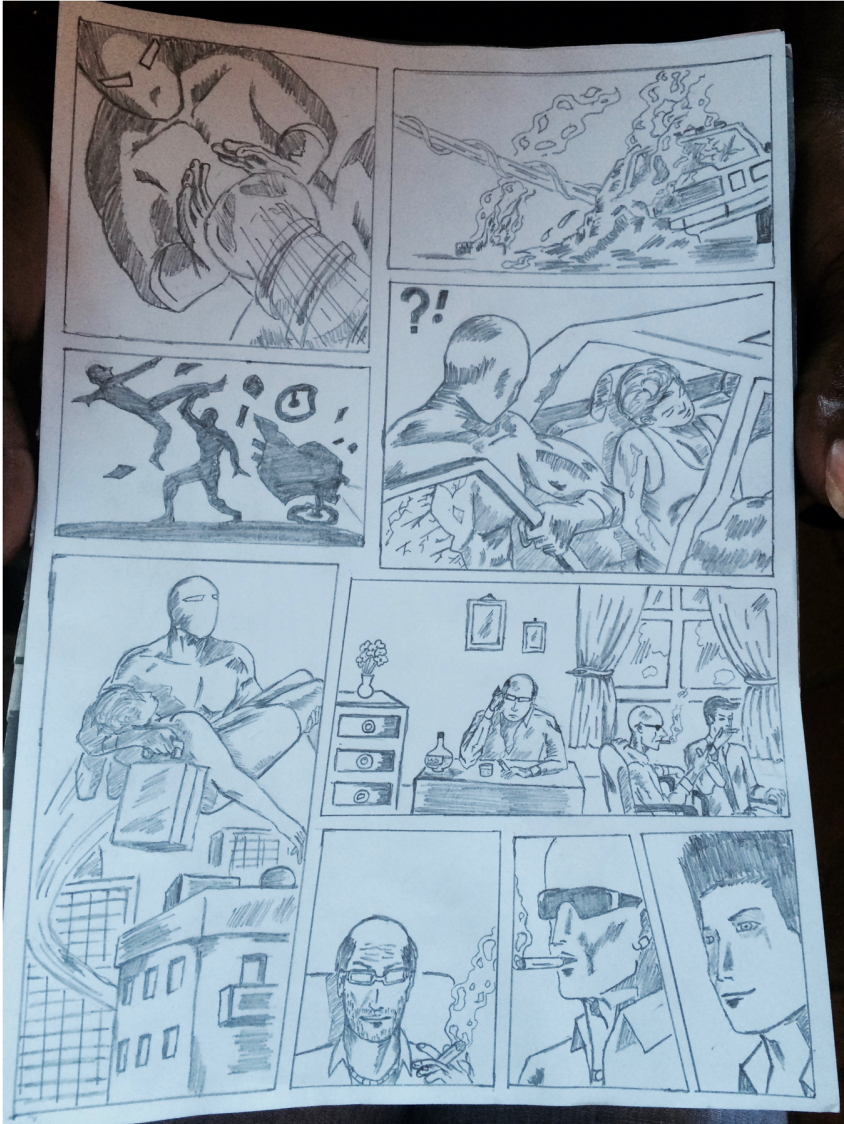became Homiex, his artistic name. His African name in Edo is Eveshomane, which

Photo #5.   "The Guardian Angel." Drawing by Homiex, photo by the author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

means "God is my creator," and Homiex is an abbreviated form of it, as he explained to me. He started spending hours and days at the empty church in Ortigia, which Ramzi let him use as an art studio. When I saw him there, he was so immersed in painting and drawing that he would hardly raise his head to greet me. He looked focused and serious, tense and quiet. He seemed to inhabit another rhythm. He

was silent and solitary. Whenever we gathered with the other youth at the church to work on the theater project, he would never join. "I don't do that; I draw and now I paint," he once said. And he kept painting, instead, or he would sit on the floor to observe us as we played with space, sounds, objects, and lights. He painted still life, then city streets, squares, and buildings; women crying blood and men's disfigured faces; burning hands and sun-lit beaches; villages and birds. The range of his drawings revealed a breadth of urgent exploration, disciplined and excessive. He rarely put things into words. Only when asked would he stutter a few comments, attempting at a description that always left him, and his interlocutors, feeling incomplete.[4]

For instance, when he showed me the painting of "The Woman Crying Tears of Blood" (photo #6), I asked him what inspired it. "I make my art with my present mood. I woke up in the morning with so much anger, and I decided to put it in an image form," he replied. Then, as he usually ended the descriptions of his work, he added: "It's deep sorrow art." I wanted to ask what sorrow he was referring to but did not because I felt my questions had become loud and inappropriate before his drawings, as if his uncertainty in answering was starting to be mirrored in my hesitance to ask. There were no easy answers to my questions, and maybe there were no answers altogether. When asked about what compelled him to draw in a certain way, he often replied "I don't know." Instead of questioning, I began to "listen" to images and their affects, noting how they refused to elicit a story or a narrative through-line. I was made to experience them, to not succumb to the idea that they were descriptions of an experience. They invited a relation unmediated by the dominant migrant narrative.

A few days later, Homiex posted the painting of an injured man's face on his Facebook page, and he wrote me a text: "The guy is said to be suffering internally. I have showed [sic] the suffering in form of an X-ray view. He was infected on the right side of the skin where there is plaster. It's a sorrowful art." "What led you to paint it?" I tentatively wrote back. "I really don't know" was his reply. I let Homiex's not knowing linger in my experience of the paintings, creating cracks in the search for meaning, in my desire to read the painting as yet another iteration of the crisis and violence of borders. But I heard his "I don't know" as a way for him to protect the intimacy of his paintings from the violence embedded in the language of recognition (see photo #7).

I would argue that Homiex is exploring a different relationship to experience and images, and the relation between them, than the one offered through the crisis-grammar. His language is made of fragments of speech-acts that have an oblique relationship to the figures he creates, just as his paintings have a free associative relationship to his experiences or the real world. They are affective engagements, relying on dream-like connections, unmediated by either signification or the demands of representation and explanation. He'd rather not explain them. They are untranslatable in the same ways that dreams—in their pictorial and fragmented form—are, interpretable only by way of a forged linear narrative. Homiex once told me: "I made a painting one time [. . .] and I wasn't able to interpret [it], someone else had to interpret my painting to me. And I was like 'oh, I see, I see now.'"

Photo #6.   "The Woman Crying Blood." Painting by Homiex. Photo is courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

When we dream, we apprehend the world through images rather than discursive modes of knowing; in this way, we glimpse the power of images which resist being rendered as singular and uncontested facts (Stevenson 2014). But dreams, like images, are not just ways of knowing. Binswanger (1993) argued that images in dreams are not indexes pointing to some other hidden meanings but are themselves manifestations of being. Dreaming and life are bound together, and the dream is the moment when existence happens in its translation into images. Foucault wrote that in dreams we encounter "a language that expresses without formulating" (1993). Freud, as well, implied that when awake we think in concepts, and when sleeping

Photo #7.   "He sustained an injury with virus on d right chic. Seriously making him to lose blood" (Homiex). Paining by Homiex. Photo is courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

and dreaming we experience through images (1899). Similarly, in paintings one can experience through image.

Homiex's art resists the allure of the event and its demands for narrative. His images express without formulating, making "sorrowful art" that refuse the teleology of crisis and response. It refuses the heroic eventfulness of the "migrant journey" that Ramzi suggested as a theme for his drawings, even while migration as an experience of movement and *errance* (Echeverri Zuluaga 2015) is not denied or repressed in his work. This theme traverses his paintings, echoing the archaic voices of the past and playing with the dangerous figures of witches and worshipers without being reduced to a discourse of African localism. He makes the figures "free" from the logic of the linear journey without abolishing the other grammars of power that come from elsewhere that he feels now interpellate him to draw. The cartoons of the Guardian Angel, for instance, which he drew before his arrival in Italy, represent a

Worshipers

Photo #8.   "Worshipers." Painting by Homiex. Photo is courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

hero-like character engaged in adventures of rescue, inscribed within and resonant with a grammar of Western heroism and economic fantasy, wealth, and redemption. When he showed me the painting (photo #8) entitled "Worshipers," his verbal associations added more nuances to his own experience of the paintings:

> I don't know what those people are worshiping. I have showed a serpent's eyes as the gods which they are worshiping. The serpent is important in a village in Edo state, I was told many years ago but I don't remember the village. They worship a python that only comes out once in years, and people make sacrifices to it.

It wasn't clear if the painting gestured toward the power of magic and its force field, or if the serpent stood for other forms of power that could turn persecutory. Ambiguity in relation to the common tropes of movement, rescue, and salvation was built in. On another occasion, as we stood in front of the same painting, he said that he was scared by it: "It is as if the [serpent's] eyes are looking at you. [. . .] I look at the painting, and it's always looking at me! It keeps looking at me even when I look away. And at night, the color that I used in this place shines with the light."

Homiex's images bear witness to a diffuse and generalized affect that exceeds the narrow logic of chronicity that commonly shapes crisis narratives. His artistic expressions of refusal may have something to do with the unbearable nature of certain unconscious memories—memories that cannot be represented in an illustrative way because they are intractable and can only be glimpsed obliquely, indirectly, and through what exceeds language. This is not to say, as a certain psychoanalytic

reading would claim, that his images are merely symptoms or projections of a traumatic past (Recalcati 2016). As I mentioned earlier, what I mean by the therapeutic is not the care and/or cure of symptoms, but rather an ethics of creation, a disposition toward experience that allows for exploration and for different experiences exceeding dominant grammars to occur. Homiex's "I don't know" allows for the possibility of not resolving contradictions and remaining suspended in the psychic and experiential space created in between them (photo #9). It allows him to dwell in the ambivalence of his worlds without choosing a side to inhabit.

The space in which Homiex's explorations take place through colors, shapes, forms, and shades resonates with Donald Winnicott's ideas of transitional objects and phenomena. As a child psychologist, Winnicott was particularly interested in the ways in which infants approached the world beyond the mother by exploring and developing dependence on specific objects such as the teddy bear, a special pillow, a piece of cloth, and so forth. He understood these objects as "transitional" in the sense that they marked a first attempt on the part of the child to detach from the mother and learn to experience the environment around it on its own. In his words, transitional objects are an "intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott 1971, 2). They are not part of the infant's body and yet are not fully recognized as belonging to an external reality other than the mother, either. They live in the middle; they are staged by the child in an in-between that is simultaneously separate from and connected to the world of the mother. They belong to the domain of illusion and represent a necessary passage, almost like an initiation, to experience by providing the individual who is constantly engaged in "the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate and yet interrelated" (1971, 14) with a resting place where she can gradually articulate her relation to the world in terms other than the experience of merging with the mother. The transitional space is where the negative can be experienced as a potential affirmation. Experiencing this in-between-ness allows for a radical deferral of the world of signification and meaning (the mother is not the literal mother but is experienced through transitional objects and spaces) to create something anew.

Winnicott saw a connection between transitional phenomena and the individual's capacity in adult life to nourish and develop her own creativity as a way of apprehending and inhabiting the world. He was concerned with the issue of creativity well beyond the question of art, because it is through a creative impulse that the child both learns about and makes its own world. The creative impulse is something that occurs not only when an artist produces art, but also in the moment-by-moment living, when, for instance, a child is "making a mess with feces or prolonging the act of crying to enjoy a musical sound." Creativity is the ability to explore potentialities that extend and expand the time of playing in the middle, in the space created by the partial dis-identification from the world of the mother, and the creation of a world otherwise; in this transitional space one exists in pure potentiality, not actualized or identified *yet* in any category or identity. Winnicott thus introduces the possibility—corporeal, affective, simultaneously verbal, and nonverbal—of an affective space that allows experiencing (without containing) that which exceeds any grammar, and that Deleuze and Agamben (1993) identified as the potential initiated by Bartleby's refusal.[5]

Photo #9.   "Enymies gone suicide." Painting by Homiex. Photo is courtesy of the artist. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Homiex's art seems to occur in a similar space that is separate yet interrelated, and that enables new relations to the worlds he inhabits. In the space of his paintings, he is neither-nor: neither migrant nor refugee, neither foreigner nor Italian. He could inhabit several state categories of recognition—unaccompanied foreign minor, refugee, victim of human trafficking, undocumented—and make a profit out of these various pre-assigned identities, but when he is interpolated to do so through his

drawings he says he would prefer not to. His refusal is generative and it produces a reveal (McGranham 2016; Simpson 2014). As Audra Simpson has argued in the context of Canada and its history of settler colonialism, indigenous groups' refusal of the gifts of recognition is "a possibility for doing things differently, for thinking beyond the recognition paradigm" (2017, 12), as a practice that defies "reduction and ethnographic containment" (2017, 4).[6] Homiex relates his paintings to words in ways that allow him to stay in-between categories of recognition. If he reduced them to any specific event or narrative, he would dissolve the painting's very force as a transitional phenomenon. I would argue that this is similar to the potential that Agamben assigns to the figure of Bartleby who would rather not follow the order of his employer. This posture is not a form of passive–aggressiveness that leads to a new social order (Zizek 2006), nor a mere refusal of the system (Hardt and Negri 2000). Victor has no "outside" from which he could be the anti-system. But Victor's Homiex offers a refusal that enables him to operate against the system with the force of a minor logos, resembling more what Deleuze and Guattari call the minor language of Kafka, which is not the language of a minority, but "rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (1986, 16). As Deleuze puts it, Bertleby's figure points to a nonrational logic, an excess, "a question without response" (1998, 83).

Refusing to Conclude

The questions Homiex left unanswered (about identity, origins, life trajectory) suggest that it is possible to live in the shadows of a grammar by enacting a certain kind of refusal. In the space of this refusal, one neither belongs nor doesn't belong to a "grammar." This means that alternate stories may be told, and more importantly, other presences felt.[7] This space of refusal resonates with both Winnicott's transitional space and Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," while holding a certain tension with Wittgenstein's idea of grammar and the forms of life enacted through it. Wittgenstein's language games open up the question of the ontology of different forms of life, and how different forms of power and knowledge are enacted within specific language games and the subject/object positions they enable. I have offered an (analytical) montage with Homiex's explorations, dominant language games, and transitional spaces because the paintings he shared with me made me wonder when and how one could live, or spend time, beyond or beside worlds, not being fully within or circumscribed by a language game.

Different degrees of fluidity and transgression run through all forms of life, and transitional spaces (and phenomena) enable experiences that are in the making, whose form lacks fixed rules. In other words, it is a space that allows testing the boundaries of worlds and their grammars, playing with the suspension of categories and the potential of experiencing otherwise. This does not gesture toward the complete absence of language games altogether, nor does it mean one is completely outside dominant worlds. It rather suggests that one can be in-between worlds, in a playful space of invention.[8] The space in which Homiex creates images resembles the experience of dreaming—a transitional phenomenon of sorts—constantly and simultaneously populated by the external world(s) and by unconscious material (Freud 1899). In dreams, rules are turned upside down, an image can mean its

opposite, words can be spoken backward, and a dead person can be alive; yet, the dream content is only partially disconnected from "real" life, which gets re-worked through the unconscious. Like in transitional spaces, in dreaming worlds are suspended and rearranged, symbols are resignified in the temporary suspension of rational logic.

Homiex's art is an experiment. It gives form to the formless, affective, and elusive. When he links the image of the woman crying blood to his feelings of anger, he is connecting the figural to an affect that exceeds signification. The blood disturbs all relations of signification while staging an affect. His paintings and his ways of referring to them are not a window into reality and the world. They are "playing with reality" (Winnicott 1971). This process may lead to the creations of a new grammar-world, or not. Through them, he is producing an interruption in the grammar of power, and the logic of identity. Here, the potential of Bartleby's position is not the opposite of actuality, but it is closer to creativity as a field of affect in which force produces novelty and not the repetition of the same. This is the force of the therapeutic as an ethics that doesn't resolve contradictions and allows a painting to be simultaneously experience and image, story and the absence of narrative. This force is present in the interstices of the various grammars of power, and outside the language of symptoms and cure. Homiex's refusal to represent the "journey" doesn't signify a mere denial of history; instead, it precisely operates in the register of the performative, a "no" that enables a new kind of advent. It initiates, for him, a different process that separates experience from its representation, and allows him to dwell in a heterotopic space of invention.

Notes

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1. This metric of crisis is also produced by the ratio of requests for asylum and the actual number of refugee statuses granted. According to the Association for the Juridical Study of Migration, in 2016 the number of applicants was 123,370, with a rejection rate of 60.6%. Only 5.3% of the applicants received refugee status. The remaining obtained the subsidiary or humanitarian statuses which are of a temporary nature and require renewal every two years. In 2018, the same source reported 53,596 applicants, with a rejection rate of 59%: http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/statistics

2. According to the UN General Assembly (1951) (*Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*), a refugee is defined as:

> A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

The Convention expands on Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. See full text: https://web.archive.org/web/20120607013438/http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/refugees.htm

3. For another example of an evocative art installation around the crossing and deaths in the Mediterranean, see Danish sculptor and video artist Nikolaj Larsen's *End of Dreams* in the Italian port town of Pizzo Calabro (Calabria): https://www.nbsl.info/end-of-dreams-portraits and Rhiannon Welch's article "Time Out of Joint: Larsen's *End of Dreams* and Italy's "Colonial Unconscious" (2016).

4. I am aware that in Western traditions, the artist is often portrayed as someone who doesn't know how to speak about his or her art. In this particular essay, I listen to Homiex's stuttered responses as a stand—unconscious or conscious—that speaks to dominant discourses around movement and borders in ways that powerfully exceed the mere figure of the aloof artist. Art is a process that allows him to refuse the straightforward processes of recognition that reduce experience to legal categories.

5. I do not invoke Winnicott to suggest that Homiex is childlike in his artistic endeavors, but I do think that the notion of transitional phenomena helps clarify an ethnographic reading of art as a form of refusal.

6. In Simpson's work, refusal is grounded in indigenous groups' conscious "turning away" from the state's gifts to keep their own sovereignty alive (a world that exists nested within a dominant one and refuses to be subsumed by it). In Homiex's case, refusal manifests through his not necessarily conscious process of exploration of alternative subject positions through art (this process may or may not lead to the emergence of a new grammar-world).

7. I am particularly indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers who raised important questions about whether it is possible to live beside a world or not, and what a world is. In this final section, I follow some of their suggestions.

8. In psychodynamic parlance, the transitional space is pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic; it is a nonverbal space of experience and emotions—outside interpretation—that is held and contained by the safe presence of the world-mother. The child can explore if it feels held and secure by the existence of a perimeter wherein the exploration occurs.

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