

Narrative Rhythmanalysis: the art and politics of listening to women's narratives of forced displacement

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Abstract: In this paper I draw on my experiences of listening to migrant and refugee women's stories of displacement and explore questions around discourses and practices of listening across borders and languages. In doing so, I particularly focus on the materiality of listening, the force of corporeal voices, the rhythms of oral narratives and their effects on understanding and making connections within the web of human relations. Following tracks and traces of a rich body of literature around sounds, voices and texts in narrative analytics and feminist theory, I have turned my attention to aurality and I have suggested *narrative rhythmanalysis* as a mode of understanding and as a method. What I argue is that turning our attention to listening practices as a neglected process in theoretical analysis illuminates the perspective of the storyteller, mobilizes affective forces in the milieu of relational narratives and enacts the materiality of knowledge through the intensity and uniqueness of the corporeal voice. What I finally suggest is that perhaps we should move beyond the imperatives of clarity and transparency in an attempt to be in the world with others. Here the sound of narratives could become a trope that can take us down the path of decolonizing our ways of knowing and understanding.

Key words: listening, voices, sounds, narrative rhythmanalysis, forced displacement

Listening is a political activity that enables us to live-in -the-world-with others, but it is also a complex political and agonistic practice: while we focus on the speaker, we never listen in a void, but within a background that we have to map and understand. In the same way that we are situated speakers, we are also always, already situated listeners: we always listen from somewhere, no matter how open or willing we are to move from our position. In this paper I draw on my experiences of listening to migrant and refugee women's stories of displacement in Athens and Lesbos, Greece in the context of a Leverhulme funded project, 'Revisiting the nomadic subject'.¹ In this project I have explored the use of 'the nomadic subject' in feminist theory and politics. The main research question that I have raised is whether nomadism has become a concept politically loaded and irreparably infected with the unbearable heaviness of those who are not able to move and cross borders and boundaries—the dark side of the moon of privileged mobility. Taking up the salience of stories not only in recounting experiences, but also in forming an experiential basis for changing the subject and its world, I have interviewed 22 migrant and refugee women about their experiences of being on the move. I have encouraged these women to tell stories about their decision to leave, as well as about their experiences of travelling without feeling obliged to limit themselves within discourses of victimization and vulnerability. Following lines from Arendt's philosophy (1998), I have asked them to recount their lives in the light of 'who they are', as unique and unrepeatable human beings, and not as 'what they are' —objectified 'refugees', 'victims', 'stateless subjects'. Since this was a narrative research project I have only asked my participants one question in the beginning: 'Please tell me the story of how you travelled to

Greece; you can start wherever you want and you can end wherever you want, I am not going to interrupt you'. At the end of their story, I asked them a second question, about how they imagined their lives in 5-10 years' time. Out of the 22 narrative interviews, which were all recorded with the consent of the participants, 6 were conducted in Farsi, 5 in English, 4 in Arabic, 3 in French, 2 in Greek and 2 in Pashto. The Arabic, Farsi and Pashto interviews, 12 in total, were conducted with the presence of an interpreter.

The research was conducted in Athens and in Lesbos Greece in 2018-2019, following ethical permission from the University (omitted). My participants were recruited through a number of international, civic and feminist organizations working with migrant and refugee women in Greece.² My situated position as a white academic feminist was entangled with the radical activism of my youth in Greece when I was still a university student. Those years have forged life-long friendships with women who are now in the fore front of a wide range of non-governmental and civic organization for women's rights in Greece. It was mainly through these networks that I was introduced to the women who shared with me their stories of forced displacement. Most of the women who participated in this research told me that they did it because they wanted their voices to be heard and their stories to be circulated more widely. My entry in the field was thus marked by trust and feminist solidarity, and therefore the feminist activism of my past created the conditions of possibility for this research.

The paper unfolds in four parts: first I look at a body of literature around sounds and voices in narrative analytics and feminist theory, then I consider the importance of *narrative rhythmanalysis* as a mode of understanding and as a method. In the third part I explore dangerous liaisons between voices and texts and finally I make a cartography of entanglements between listening, feeling and understanding in the archive of the stories that migrant and refugee women have generously shared with me.

Sounds and the politics of voices

Sounds and voices have become a burgeoning area of interest in narrative research, particularly around the emotional and cognitive impact that they can have on both listeners and story-tellers. (see Mildford and Kinzel, 2016) Human voices can both speak and sing amongst other sounds that they continuously create. In the process of listening to the sounds of words and stories, voices emerge as corporeal and unique: 'the task of the voice is to be a pathway, or better a pivotal joint between body and speech', Adriana Cavarero has argued (2005, p.15).

Cavarero's philosophical thought on 'the vocal ontology of uniqueness' (2005, p.173) is also a pathway to understanding how voice is inextricably related to politics. Drawing on Arendt, Cavarero defines politics as 'the reciprocal performance of doing and saying' further linking it to the politics of voices. Susan Bickford (1996) also draws on Arendt's performative politics to dig deeper into the political aspects of listening. Although Arendt did not write about listening per se, active listening is implied in the way she configures the importance of the public realm for political communication and the formation of opinions, Bickford has commented (1996, p.90). It is while listening to others that we think, speak and act and thus 'solidarity is the principle that guides listening action.' (ibid.)

Thinking about listening in Arendtian terms, Bickford dissects the vocality of political expression, but more importantly considers the way listening practices create exclusions and

inclusions. What she suggests is that the way we are heard (or not) by others charts our presence or absence in the political arena. Audibility then goes hand in hand with vocality in what Iris Marion Young has configured as 'deep democracy' (2002, p.5), practices striving for inclusion within assemblages of social, political, economic and cultural differences. Moreover, 'political listening is not necessarily a caring or amicable practice and it does not necessarily evoke empathy' Bickford argues (1996, p.2), flagging up conflict as a necessary component of politics that is rather downplayed in Arendtian politics.

Migrant and refugee women's corporeal voices were at the heart of how I have made connections with their stories of travelling. My encounter with them was an instance of what Young has highlighted as 'the concrete encounter with others' (1990, p.106), an event which created conditions of possibility for situated knowledges and understandings to arise. Attentive and affective listening has facilitated such concrete encounters, although it did not necessarily involve or generate empathy, neither did it always end up in agreement or in a harmony of viewpoints. Following Young, I am against erasing differences and the effects they make: 'when class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age define different social locations, one subject cannot fully empathize with another in a different social location, adopt her point of view', Young has wisely pointed out. (1990, p.105) And yet the acknowledgement of difference does not preclude the possibility of recognizing the needs, desires and perspectives of differently situated subjects. On the contrary, listening to the expression of the needs and desires of others is a precondition of being listened to in the dialogics of what Young has configured as 'communicative ethics' (ibid., p.106).

On a plane of communicative ethics and aesthetics, or what I have configured as 'the art of listening', there were times when the semantics of women's speech and the sounding of their vocal cords were entangled in my listening practices. Such were the cases when women were narrating their stories in English, Greek and French, languages that I could follow and understand. But there were also cases when their stories were narrated in languages that felt like music to me and there were continuous gaps between the musicality of their voices and their discourse, which was mediated via the interpreter. In such cases, it was the sound of their rhythmical movement that I have tried to follow, including moments when the narrators' and the interpreters' voices were intermingling in unexpected chords and dynamic duets. As I will further discuss in the next section of the paper, what I think I have discerned in such stories were patterns of words, sounds and voices brought together only temporarily and provisionally, as an effect of experimenting with music and rhythm. The sonics of women's stories thus gave rise to unexpected affinities, 'flows, forces and energies' (Mason, 2018), that created connections within the narrative scene itself, but also beyond it, in the on-going process of listening again to the recorded voices.

Narrative Rhythmanalysis

A lot has been written about relations between language, narrative and music particularly drawing on the structuralist field of narratology: 'perhaps the structures that literary theorists have found in narrative resemble the structures that music theorists have found in musical compositions', Fred Everett Maus has pithily noted (1991, p.1). Music is both patterned and communicative, but it also always eludes systematic meaning analysis. But although music evades narrative tropes, it does inspire us to imagine and indeed create new narratives or analyse and interpret existing ones. Music evokes memory and triggers imagination,

effortlessly bringing both faculties together in telling, writing or listening to stories. What I have repeatedly highlighted in my work with narratives, however, is that music's 'infinitely possible variations' are in fact components of *narrative assemblages*, within which stories are told, listened to and analysed. (see Tamboukou 2015). On this plane of narrative analytics, musical analogies in travelling stories and beyond, unveil themes, characters and events that are continuously affirmed and reaffirmed through rhythmical repetition.

Rhythm is of course one of the most important musical and linguistic concepts: as an unfolding of sounds and silences it creates patterns through which music and language move and flow. We all know and feel how important rhythm is not just in music, but also in storytelling, not to mention art and everyday life. Henri Lefebvre's *rythmanalysis* becomes particularly pertinent here. 'What we live are rhythms, rhythms experienced subjectively', Lefebvre wrote in his major work, *The Production of Space* (1991, p.206). For Lefebvre, rhythms are of the world and in the world, they are cyclical repetitions entangled with linear processes, and they are never identical—there is 'always something new and unforeseen emerging from their repetition' (2004, p.15). Lefebvre also warns against confusing rhythms with movement or sequence of movements, speed, or machines. Moreover, the meaning of rhythm is obscure and so we need to learn to listen to the rhythms of a house, a street, a neighbourhood, an archive, or a story in the case of this chapter.

But what does it mean to think and live rhythm? 'Rhythmanalysis could change our *perspective on surroundings*', Lefebvre notes; it makes us aware that there is 'nothing inert in the world, *no things: very diverse rhythms*' (2004, p.17). In this light rhythmanalysis could also change our perspective on embodied and embedded narrative contexts I would add, being reconfigured as *narrative rhythmanalysis*. Following Lefebvre, this is an approach, which is entangled in the here and now of listening to the rhythms of movement and activities including the vocal expression and embodied sonority of storytelling. *Narrative rhythmanalysis* eventuates in recognising the existence of repetitious patterns in the semantics of storytelling, as well as in the modalities of voices and sounds. It thus brings to the fore the catalytic role of the story space/time/matter not just on the level of context, but also and perhaps more importantly on the level of vocal expression and embodied listening, thus opening up new analytical paths and insights.

As it repeatedly engages with a mechanical restaging of storytelling however, *narrative rhythmanalysis* can never be conclusive: it is rather a process, constantly unearthing new signs and meanings. Audio technologies in their capacity to store and reproduce are fundamental in the creation of archives of stories in a variety of disciplines, but they also become co-constructors of meaning. Alessandro Portelli (1998) has influentially discussed how the story's imagined future repetitions will shape both its form and content at the moment of telling. I have followed Portelli's important reflection on how machines intervene in storytelling practices, particularly focusing on how the voice recorder is entangled in future listenings and the meanings that will derive from them. It is this concern with voices and their textual representation that brings me to the next section of the paper.

Voices and Texts

As most oral narratives, the stories that I have heard were never told in fully structured and comprehensive sentences, even when women were speaking in their mother tongue. In transcribing the stories, I thus decided to create two modes of written texts: proses and

poems. Catherine Riessman's scholarship was influential in my experiments with different modes of textualizing oral narratives. Transcripts are constructed narratives for Riessman: 'by our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major part in constituting the narrative data that we then analyze', she has argued (2008, p.50) In looking back at her work with South India women's stories of infertility Riessman has given an example of constructing two different transcripts: a) a written record of the conversation and b) a version where the interviewer's intervention is 'omitted' so that the voice of the narrator can be highlighted. (ibid., 29) In the field of oral history however, where the transcript/voice debate has been raging for years, Raphael Samuel has been less sympathetic with the violence of the transcript: 'the spoken word can very easily be mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page' (1972, p.2) he has written.

Keeping Samuel's 'perils of the transcript' (1972) in mind, but also taking the multi-modality of transcriptions as a mode of experimenting with the voice/text dangerous liaisons, stories transposed to prose chart the Ricoeurian 'emplotment' of the narrative. In creating these prose, I have followed the storyline, taking out all the hesitations, repetitions, sounds, pauses, twists and turns, in short, all signs of orality. The spoken story was thus flattened out into the monotone of the text to allow for its plot and characters to take the front stage. In constructing the 'poem' version on the other hand, I have attempted to trace the dynamics of the listening process, following the sounds, rhythms and alliterative patterns of the narrative voice in the way I sensed them while listening. In creating the poem version, I was inspired by Dennis Tedlock's work of creating free verses in an attempt to seize moments in the life of oral history narratives (1991). His attempt to enliven the printed version of the narratives reverberates with my experiment in tracing the aural signs of the narrative scene in the form of a poem. My construction of the 'poem version' of women's narratives attends closely to how I feel the sounds of stories in terms of tone, pitch, rhythm and pause. Each aural change is signalled by a new line in the stanzas I have created. Apart from this simple line change, the poems do not follow any notation: they are rather free verses that chart lines of feeling the narrative and thus unveiling moments of meaning making that were enacted by this feeling. As I have written elsewhere drawing on Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy, feeling in my analytics is a process through which both the analyst and his/her findings or understanding emerge in their interrelation and mutual constitution (see Tamboukou 2016).

In thus taking the decision to create transcripts in two experimental forms, I have effectively argued that transcription is always, already an interpretation, but also an act in and of itself that eventually transposes the audio document into a text with important epistemological consequences.³ Narratives are being created within specific space/time/matter assemblages in a distinctive voice captured in the mechanics of the recorder. Through transcription the researcher and his or her assistants refigure this voice through writing. In doing so they actually tame and effectively silence the vibrating voice — they transpose it into an unmoving text, and it is for the reader to search for voices in-between its words. And yet, Portelli (1994) seems to interrogate the voice / text relation, presenting the aporias of a search for either of them. Like Portelli, I have always been sceptical of what authenticity might mean either in audio files or in written texts. In the context of my ambivalence, I have thus decided to take a detour: my analysis of women's stories has not drawn on written transcripts, experimental as they are, but rather on repeated and intense listenings. Considering Gemma Corradi's pithy observation that as researchers we often find ourselves entangled in 'a system of knowledge that tends to ignore listening processes' (1990, p.1) my analysis was underpinned by precisely this neglected listening process, moving

alongside the complex performance of storytelling with its inflections, pitch, pace and rhythm. By turning my sensory antennae to what is audible rather than merely visible in the transcript, I got immersed in an assemblage of sounds, silences, pauses, laughs and cries — soundscapes that enacted the process of understanding and meaning making, and were later on imbued in the writing. Women's voices thus became the sirens that have kept disrupting and destabilizing thought, releasing multiple significations around analytical tropes and themes.

Transcriptions were constructed after the analysis, for the needs of publications. They were also dictated by a narrative ethics of care, put simply the need to protect my participants who have often narrated their story within vulnerable situations. Here it is striking to note that out of the 22 stories that women shared with me, there was one case where the storyteller refused to be recorded and it is only the interpreter's voice that has been preserved. This stance made me much more sceptical and cautious about my responsibility to protect the storytellers, irrespective of the fact that they had given consent for the recording. What is about voices preserved and often archived in digital forms that makes them different in the way we have traditionally dealt with ethics in research? As I have already discussed in the first section drawing on Cavarero's (2005) philosophy, it is the uniqueness of the voice that also renders it recognizable and therefore vulnerable and fragile that creates new conditions and considerations for the archives of the future. The text that flattens out the voice, also shields it against intruders and manipulations. Of course, texts can also be manipulated, but voices are much more than texts, pouring into the senses of the hearers/readers, as I will further discuss in the following section.

Listening, feeling, understanding

In this section I focus on my affective entanglement with storylines and words through voice, music and rhythm. In looking back and dissecting my listening practices, I will then go back to 'the beginning'. When conducting the interviews, I would ask the storytellers to recount their experience of travelling to Greece by starting and finishing wherever they wanted. But where does a story start and / or end? Well, the short answer is that it starts from any point and ends at any other. Or rather, the story, its happenings and its affective overflows emerge in the middle of a thought, a sentence or even a word. What is of interest, Gilles Deleuze wrote is what happens in the intermezzo, the middle of things: 'it is in the middle that one finds the becoming, the movement, the velocity, the vortex' (1997, p.208). Meaning is not simply localisable in the plot, or even the discourse of the narrative. Any line, word, hesitation, sound or bodily movement is entangled in the meaning of the whole, in the linguistic gesture alone; any point is always, already, overfilled with meaning; every part of a story is a knot of different potential meanings, affects, expressions. The story is less a prose than an assemblage of language forces, a vectorial gestural nexus, wherein each starting point holds potential passages within its moment. The milieu, the middle, the intermezzo holds an infinity of meanings, thoughts and ambivalences, not all of which will be expressed in the unfolding of the story. In Christina's story below, the meaning is entangled in an assemblage of love and friendship among women friends and across borders:

I got sick and tired of going around, begging my friends for 2-3 leva to buy some bread. So, it was at such a moment when a very good friend of mine told me, 'let's phone your

friend in Athens', who I knew since we were at school together. You know how friends from school, are friends for life. So, we went to the post office to call her and we only had 5 leva. My friend was checking the phone meter and I was talking on the phone. And I told my friend, 'can you please help me to come and work in Greece? I can't stand it here anymore'. And my friend told me, 'Christina I can deeply feel your anxiety. Hang up and I will call you from home to talk at ease.' And then she called me and she said, 'do not worry, I will arrange everything and I will send you money for your ticket to come here.'

This is how I decided to come to Greece. But to do that I had the support of my women friends in Silistra. They gave me strength and they told me not to be afraid. I was also thinking that my best friend would be waiting for me in Greece, whatever happens, she would be waiting for me. So, when I first came to Greece, the only thing I knew was that my friend would wait for me. That was all, nothing else.⁴

Christina is a Bulgarian woman in her early sixties. She went to Greece to work as a carer to evade the post-socialism poverty trap in the early years of the new millennium. As Steven Castles (2006) has persuasively argued migration and forced displacement form a continuum that is linked to the social transformations of globalization. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez has further developed the analytical framework of 'the coloniality of migration' (2018), looking into socio-economic and political connections between asylum and migration in the process of their mutual constitution. Christina's story emerges from the entanglements of 'the coloniality of migration' and revolves around her experiences in a chain of households and situations she has worked in the last fourteen years. What runs as a red thread throughout her story is a network of women friends who have helped and supported her, both in Greece and in Bulgaria. Although I have known Christina for a long time through family networks, I had never realized the importance of her women friends in her life. Drawing on Deleuze's notion of difference, Bronwyn Davies (2016) has developed the notion of 'emergent listening' as distinctive from 'listening-as-usual'. If our listening is driven by what we already [think] we know, then we cannot immerse in 'a multi-sensual encounter with the world' (2016, p.73), a process that can reveal more than, and at times against what we know. Emergent listening is a becoming, unfolding in the middle of stories, in the intermezzo of narratives and foregrounds the possibility of 'affective openness to the other' (p.74).

The trope of friendship and its significance in a migrant woman's life was something that erupted unexpectedly from the intermezzo of Christina's narrative and all of a sudden, her story was illuminated: it became meaningful from my situated listening perspective and created a new analytical theme that I had not anticipated or included in my initial question of what it means 'to travel alone'. The importance of friends in women's lives is of course a well discussed theme in feminist theories and beyond. If my analysis had drawn on a transcript, perhaps I would have read it as an anticipated theme that was not telling me 'anything new'. However, the passion and intensity of Christina's voice when talking about her friends, made me think differently. Listening to her voice again and again and thinking about how central friendship has been in her life, I discerned the counter-narrative of the discourses around 'migrant and refugee women travelling alone'. As I have discussed elsewhere at length (Tamboukou 2020a), such discourses structure a wide range of reports and policy documents that deal with the unprecedented phenomenon of women moving *en masse* across the globe without the company of adult men. What has emerged as an overarching theme in my

research, however, is that women do not travel alone: they always travel with their children and or/friends. Talking about migrant and refugee women as 'lonely subjects' or helpless victims, disregards and downplays their agential moves and does not do much to eradicate gender-based violence either.

Women friends have indeed appeared in stories of displacement in different roles: as confidantes, co-travellers, financial supporters, as well as conspirators in secret and dangerous escapes. They have created a matrix within which migrant and refugee women emerge as relational subjects: although they have been labelled as 'women travelling alone', they were never lonely. Telling stories of friendship and camaraderie has thrown fresh light in their existential 'whoness', the unique and unrepeatable 'who' of Arendt's and Cavarero's philosophies:

It was night when we arrived, but my friend was waiting for me at the airport. When I saw her, it was like meeting my mum, this is how safe I felt. Everything else was irrelevant, the only thing that mattered was that my friend was there, and she was waiting for me. I held her hand and I am still holding it today. I never do anything without consulting her. She is not just my friend, she is my sister and mother, she is the world for me. She is the best person on earth, she is my goddess, how can I tell you? She is my angel. I will never forget what she has done for me.⁵

The passionate way that Christina told the story of meeting her friend at the airport, revealed an unknown and hidden part of her persona. I thought I knew Christina, but did I? Well, I knew her as a 'what', a migrant domestic worker, a wife, a mother and a grandmother; I had even met her family when they had visited Greece and I had hosted them in my Athens flat. But it was only through listening to the story of her love and attachment to her friend that I made connections with her existential 'who'. We can never really grasp the complexity of human experience and expression and thus the unpredictability of stories and the new meanings that can burst forth are often surprising. Oral history after all 'is less about events than about meaning' Portelli has influentially argued (1991, 50).

If a story is evasive, creating an analytical grid of 'units of meaning' is not enough, no matter how well designed, organised and theorised this can be. What the narrative researcher can do instead, is to move in-between listening positions, since a situated position can become a gateway to meaning and understanding, or rather to their dynamic movement, which keeps jumping and shifting. Understanding, or rather feeling a story is not simply about taking up situated positions, but rather about following the motion of meaning, its leaps, interferences and diffractions, in short, the activation of a story in becoming.

But what exactly do we see of the process of a story in becoming? Simply put, it is lines of narratives and designs of figures, never whole plots or characters as such. A word, a sigh, a silence, a hesitation erupts, but this is just a trace of a narrative field that will never be fully discernible or accessible, not even to the narrator who inhabits it, let alone the listener, no matter how attentive or sensitive he or she is. As Corradi has noted, considering silence, might enable us to capture emerging meanings, before they hide within the logocentric codes of western thought. (1990, p.95) The task of the researcher is therefore to make visible what can only be felt in the unfolding of the narrative. In this sense meaning is always in transit, in-between what is expressed, what is felt, what is registered and rewritten. Meaning circles around the rhythm of language. Anna's story was such a moment of a circular narrative that

emerged from a phrase that she kept repeating during her story: 'there is deception everywhere' [c'est toujours la déception].

Anna is a woman from Congo in her early twenties. She had to leave her country towards the beginning of 2018 after she fell victim of a gang rape in the household where she was working as a domestic. 'The lady' of the house gave her the money to go, thus covering up her husband's violent crime, but while Anna was in transit in Turkey, she realized that she was pregnant. I met Anna through *Iliaktida*, a civic organization protecting vulnerable refugees in Lesbos and interviewed her in a flat in Mytilini, where she was living with her baby daughter. In its poem version, Anna's story unfolded in two 'stanzas'. The first stanza mostly revolved around her experience of living in Mytilini in 'solitude' and 'tranquillity', avoiding people, who she could no longer trust; it was short and gave no details of her traumatic experience, which only appeared as a coda: it was the exit, not the recounted 'event':

I will tell my story of travelling to Greece
I had never travelled in my life before
I knew it would be very difficult
I want to be here without people
in tranquillity
people have always treated me badly
I want to be in solitude
I don't trust anybody
every time I have tried to confess my troubles to a friend
there is always deception
always deception.
I have no choice but to live alone
like that
you see I have found a friend
I trust her like my sister
I tell her my story
everything about me
about my relations with people,
but the experience I have is
better stay alone
yes
in tranquillity
lonely
only with my baby
without problems
I am from Congo
I have been here in Greece since April 14, last year [2018]
it's been one and a half year since I left my country
I came here through Turkey.
I left Congo after I was raped

Anna seemed to have finished her story at that point. There was a long silence, as we were looking at each other and at the baby who was playing around. I wasn't sure whether I should ask her the second and last question about how she was imagining her life in five, or

ten years' time, a question that I have asked all women as a way of opening up their stories to some sort of radical futurity. And suddenly the silence broke with Anna's rape story, narrated again— a reiteration built up through the emotional experience of the first stanza, as well as her repositioning vis-a-vis her listener. It seems that at that moment, at the end of the first stanza of her story, she somehow felt that the fear of deception had receded. Or maybe Anna needed more time to narrate her experience. As Min-ha Trinh has written in reflecting on the form of non-Western narratives: 'never does one open the discussion by coming right to the heart of matter. For the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be' (1989, p.1). As in Trinh's analysis, the horrific experience of being raped was postponed in Anna's story, until it was 'ready to come' (ibid.) When 'the heart of the matter' matured with 'no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through' (ibid), Anna narrated not only the rape story, but also the fear and despair of her forceful displacement:

That was a very difficult time
a matter of life or death for me
it was not easy
when I went to Turkey
I didn't know I was pregnant
I had never imagined that this would ever happen to me
I thought my life would be like any other women
being pregnant was not at all easy
I was telling myself
I must die
being pregnant
what could I do?
I couldn't work
there were not many jobs in Turkey anyway
what could I do?
being a woman
alone
I was always tired
I was feeling ill
I was crying all the time.
I was crying
I was crying
and I was telling myself
I cannot go on like that
I felt alone
isolated and abandoned
deceived
it was not easy at all

'Movement only comes from movement' in Spinoza's philosophy, Erin Manning and Brian Massumi have noted (2014, p.41) creating an analogy between the sui generis of movement and the sui generis of language: 'words only come from other words, in recurring waves' (ibid., 46). In the same way, events, plots and figures come from previous myths and

storylines and insert themselves in the rhythmic composition of narrative worlds. It was through the narration of the first condensed and concealed part of her story that Anna's second stanza emerged. It is in the ebb and flow of words and storylines that temporary openings are activated, moments and events are illuminated in the dark and silenced fields of experience.

In Whitehead's *Process Philosophy*, 'consciousness flickers; and even at its brightest there is a small focal region of clear illumination and a large penumbral region of experience in dim apprehension'. (1985, p.267) Anna's story forcefully expressed this moment of consciousness flickering, in letting out her desire to be in the world with others. It goes without saying that Anna's desire of having a life is nothing but a trace of the complexities of her existential quest. In the same way that 'the simplicity of clear consciousness is no measure of the complexity of complete experience' for Whitehead (ibid.), the clarity of a story is no measure of the complex field of experiences it has partially illuminated, particularly so, if these experiences were deeply traumatic ones.⁸

While immersing myself in narrative intermezzos, stanzas and postscripts, it was the feeling of what Édouard Glissant has discussed as 'the right to opacity' (2010) that has repeatedly struck me. For Glissant, the injunction of transparency in Western processes of understanding always involves a reductionism of complexities and multiplicities within the boundaries of conceptual norms: 'If we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the idea scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgement. I have to reduce'. (2010, pp.189-190)

In the past I have written with colleagues about narrative analysis beyond the imperative of coherence: 'what happens to the desire for textual coherence when place and location as material coherences par excellence, melt into fluid spatialities, forced displacement and diasporic subjectivities?' we have asked (Hyvärinen et al., 2010, p.7). Glissant's argument 'for the right to opacity' however, goes beyond the imperative for narrative coherence, highlighting the importance of 'relation without understanding' as a ground for freedom. 'Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics' Glissant writes, further adding that 'to understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not the nature of its components' (2010, p.190). There were two levels where I encountered this moving experience of relating in opacity.

First, it was while listening to stories in a language I could not understand, in the short interval before translation, while I was looking the storyteller in the eye. During these fleeting moments, I felt that it was the rhythm of words, the musicality of the voice and the facial movements that wove the fabric of relation, leaving traces of embodied knowledge, the familiar feeling of *sapores* in Cavarero's conceptual vocabulary. (2000, p.40) It was in the interval between the opacity of unrecognizable speech and the clarity of translation, in the interstices of languages that I could feel 'the texture of the weave', the sound of narratives.

Sounding does not create meaning, neither is it about conveying emotions, it is more about being exposed to the opacity of feeling the world and the other. For Arendt, the state of sounding can only be found in love and in poetry and it never lasts, it always flees, Cecilia Sjöholm has commented. (2015, pp.96–97) In Whitehead's philosophy (1985), life emerges from spatial and temporal interstices: the in-between zones of every living cell, as well as the intervals, between contrasting moments, notes, acts or events. Rhythm, is what brings both the temporal and the spatial dimensions together, Didier Debaise has eloquently noted (2017,

p.103): 'rhythm of the living, rhythm of the creative process, rhythm of events', and the rhythm of spoken words, I would add. Zahra's story of escaping an abusive husband in Iran and fleeing to Greece via Turkey walking in the wilderness, was such a moment.

In the beginning of the interview Zahra was coughing and she apologised for her cold and her croaky voice. But as her story was unfolding her voice was becoming more and more intense and high-pitched. When she reached the point where she was recounting the experience of crossing the Iranian-Turkish borders on foot, walking in the cold and with barely any food, her voice also reached high levels of clarity and tone. Moreover, her excitement was manifested in her body language and gestures— she was literally becoming a tragic opera performer, an alto soprano in front of my eyes. In contrast, the translator's voice was flat and monotonous, somehow creating a minimalist sound context, allowing the storyteller's voice to vibrate:

we were walking in the cold
for 3 days and 3 nights
there were many people
we were walking
and walking
we were hungry
there was nothing to eat
there was no water to drink
I only had a packet of biscuits
and I was giving it to my mum and my nephew
it was horrible
I hope nobody ever has such an experience
but I was trying to keep up my spirits
so that my mother would not be afraid
at the borders of Iran and Turkey
there was one road only
there was shooting from the Iranian police
many people were shot down
but we kept walking
I was holding my mum in one hand
and my nephew in the other
Some people crossed the borders,
others stayed behind
and were arrested by the police

So intense was my experience of listening to Zahra's story that the first thing that I did upon returning to the silence of my hotel room was to listen to the recording over and over again, while taking notes not of what had been narrated, but rather of the how of the narration, its music and its rhythm. Having been profoundly touched by Zahra's singing voice, the idea of immersing myself into the sound of the storytelling first dawned on me. It was at this point that I decided not to have the stories transcribed, but rather let myself dive in the diverse wavelengths of their sounding — the idea of experimenting with multi modes of transcription came later. Apart from driving the analytical process in the way I have already noted above, the sound of women's voices has triggered intense memories and has evoked

'affinities' of being in the field: I could see their eyes and faces again, I would remember the spatial context of the storytelling, the rare occasions that they laughed and the many moments that they cried or held their tears back. Affinities, as flows of energy manifested in the realm of sensations are 'personal connections that have *potency*' Jennifer Mason has argued (2018, p. 1), further suggesting that 'taking them seriously and exploring them opens up new and exciting possibilities for conceptualising living in the world'. (ibid).

But there was also a second level of opacity, far more resistant to 'transparency' than the non-yet translated language. As Clevis Headley has argued Glissant's opacity functions as 'a form of ontological self-defence'. (2015, p.77) It is entangled with practices of resistance against the colonization of the Western culture and expresses what has been absorbed or distorted in the histories of the transatlantic slave trade and conquest. Opacity is a practice underpinning post-colonial rhizomatic subjectivities, creating conditions of possibility 'to develop everywhere, in defiance of a universalizing and reductive humanism' Glissant has argued (1996, p.133). In this light opacity is a mode of accepting, recognizing and sustaining 'the irreducible density of the other' (ibid.). In the case of the travelling stories that comprise the archive of my research, 'opacity' was deployed as a practice that I have reconfigured as 'the will not to tell a story'. In doing so, I have joined the club of narrative theorists that have interrogated the thesis that 'human beings are inherently storytellers' (Fisher 1989).

The opacity that I encountered however in 'the will not to tell a story' was more agential, grounded on a deep ambivalence around the power effects of storytelling. The stories of my archive are full of such moments; some of them were even marked by the teller: 'Just out of revolt I did certain things but I don't want to talk about them and that's how I decided to live the Islamic democracy'¹⁰ Zahra said while recounting her story of escape. While I see the desire to tell a story as a deeply existential force, a Spinozist expression of the self, 'the will not to tell a story' is a political gesture of non-disclosure, what paraphrasing Foucault (2003) I have felt as the idea that 'the self must be defended'. It is this glimpse of a woman striving to defend herself against the pragmatic dangers of narration that the will not to tell a story has unveiled. Although I have written about narratives as 'technologies of power' (Tamboukou 2013), I do not want to move towards any hermeneutics of opacity. Here I agree with Glissant that 'the thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths [...] making me sensible to the limits of every method [...] saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices' (2010, p. 192).

While declaring and indeed demanding 'the right to opacity' (2010, p.189), Glissant nevertheless weaves this need into his poetics of relation. As opposed to the reductionism and violations of transparency, opacity is a force 'considerate of all the threatened and delicious things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging) in the expanse of Relation' (2010, p.62). Migrant and refugee women's 'unruly stories' that resisted the transparency of their travelling experiences—the 'object' of my research—opened up a new analytical pathway in my research: quite simply consider the effects of decolonial thinking in unsettling processes of knowledge production within critical feminist theories (see Tamboukou 2020b).

The oral and the aural in narrative research

In this paper, I have drawn on entanglements between narrative, music, sounds and rhythm to consider the salience of feeling and understanding women's stories of forced

displacement. In doing so I have drawn on a rich body of literature around voices and their dangerous liaisons with texts. Following tracks and traces of this literature I have turned my attention to aurality, listening practices that we deploy to make sense of orally delivered stories. Listening has been at the core of my analysis, although experimental transcripts have also been created for the purpose of publications, but also as an effect of my entanglement in narrative ethics of care—the importance of protecting storytellers in particularly sensitive and vulnerable situations.

Narratives have the power to involve us in the dynamics of thinking differently and as Ruth Salvaggio has pointed out, feminist theorists have used stories to unsettle theoretical abstractions and move into 'a place where truth and narrative intermingle in the endless telling of stories' (1999, p.39). In looking back at the affinities that were manifested in my encounters with migrant and refugee women's stories, what I wanted to highlight is Young's idea of the possibility of communicating in difference within concrete encounters and situations (1990, p.106). In this light, women's stories have circulated 'like a gift; an empty gift, which anybody can lay claim to, by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness.' (Trinh 1989, p.2). In receiving the free gift of migrant and refugee women's stories what I have argued is that perhaps we should move beyond the imperatives of clarity and transparency in an attempt to be in the world with others. Here the sound of narratives could become a trope that can take us down the path of decolonizing our ways of knowing and understanding.

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¹ See, <https://sites.google.com/view/revisiting-the-nomadic-subject> for an overview of this project. [Accessed May 6, 2020]

² For a full list of the organizations, academic networks and individuals who supported this research please see: <https://sites.google.com/view/revisiting-the-nomadic-subject/reflections-and-diffractions/august-2019> [Accessed May 6, 2020]

³ See amongst others, Ochs 1997 and Bucholtz 2000.

⁴ Christina's story, Athens, April 13, 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anna's story, Mytilini, Lesvos, April 8, 2019.

⁷ Ibid. I have decided to omit the rape details in the light of an ethics of narrative care.

⁸ The field of trauma and narratives is huge and cannot be elaborated further within the restrictions of this paper. See Meretoja 2018 for a philosophical discussion and a critical overview of this field.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.