Gender, racialisation, and border regimes: reflections on social positions and positioning in research with young people on the move

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Abstract

This article starts from our experiences as two Western women of Black mixed-race background, undertaking fieldwork among unaccompanied young men on the move in Europe. We add to scholarship on ethnographic accounts of encounters. We do this by reflecting on how our positionality affected the research process along often taken-for-granted social categories and markers of sameness and difference, as they related to our fieldwork and the space created between us and participants. We analyse the ways in which power is infused along multiple intersecting axes such as gender and race, and is imbued with movement in that space, helping people to feel, among other things, safe and unsafe, located and dislocated, and visible and invisible. We find that the social positions and positioning that emerged were tied into vulnerabilities related to gender and age, legal status, dimensions of race, class, and specific histories and imaginaries. We also show how performativity, shifting boundaries, and othering came into play and shaped bordering practices and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Migration journey, mixed-race, positionality, reflexivity, unaccompanied minors

> Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way (Behar 1996, 3).

Introduction

Scholars have long called into question binary insider-outsider positions in research (e.g., Kusow 2003; Villenas 1996; Nowicka and Ryan 2015). They point to how binaries are static and solid as either/or choices, even though such positions may not be straightforward, neither for researchers nor participants. While groups may be read in terms of their commonalities, sameness and difference exist in a complex and dynamic, multi-layered, and dialectic relationship. Therefore, as Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2014) show, proximity and distance are created and affected by a myriad of social categories and markers that may be more-or-less visible, manageable, and open for selective communication. In the same way that a glass of water does not capture tidal flows, binaries seldom capture the complexity of living. In other words, either/or choices fail to account for movement beyond boundaries. A recognition of this has led to the formulation of non-binary positionings such as the space in-between or hyphen (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), interstitial space (Matejskova 2014), and third positions (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014).

These spaces and positions draw on the concept of 'third space', articulated by Bhabha (1994) in his writing on cultural difference, as hybridity that 'enables other positions to emerge' (Rutherford 1990, 211). Third space has also been conceptualised as imaginative and radical openness to understanding space and spatiality that rejects 'either/or choice' (Soja 2009, 50). While moving beyond boundaries, third space has also been critiqued as not inherently progressive or transgressive. For example, Mitchell (1997, 551) emphasises underlying economic and cultural processes and cautions against 'the potential for collaboration in the hegemonic narratives of capitalism.' And Anthias (2001, 631) raises how hybridity insufficiently addresses issues of power or 'alienation, exclusion, violence and fundamentalism as part of cultural encounters'. Merrifield (1993, 519; emphasis in the original), moreover, draws attention to how an in-betweenness can reinforce essentialist notions through a dualistic Cartesian inclination, rather than approaching apparent binaries as part of '*a unity containing within itself different aspects*.' Additionally, Sparke (2005, xxxv) points to the importance of addressing 'the dynamic production of particular spatialities' when metaphorizing space. Keeping such critiques in mind, we engage with ambiguity and ambivalence of sameness and difference through positionality.

As two Western women of Black mixed-race background, doing fieldwork in our twenties and focusing on the journeys of unaccompanied young men in Europe, we are researchers of the same age cohort and gender, and we share phenotypic features and field of study. Such markers aid an illusion of a binary between a rather homogenous 'us' (researchers) and 'them' (participants). Yet, we add to the scholarship on the multiplicities of ways proximity and distance emerge. We embark from the social constructedness and performativity of different categories, such as gender and race (Butler 1993), and the ways such categories take on meaning and power through social positions and positionings. If we take race, a mixed-race position challenges static and monoracial categories. At the same time, it involves being differently read and racialised across contexts and being challenged as to where one locates one's contours of belonging (Campion 2017). This can involve confinement to restrictive identity categories operating within a binary logic (Trouillot 2003). Race is often approached through phenotypic 'visually defined boundaries' (Brown 2005, 197). The non-whiteness of a Black/White mixed-race position is commonly subject to racialised processes as Black, yet it may involve Black rejection as partial and inauthentic and benefit from privileges resulting from proximity to whiteness (Campion 2017). As such, it reveals many strands of both blackness and whiteness, as well as their

socio-political (re)production. Moreover, it exists in relation to 'persistent stereotypes […], racisms […], racial categories […, colourism] and local and national histories' (Campion 2017, 46).

Our aim is to unpack ways our positionality affected the research process along often taken-for-granted social categories and markers of sameness and difference as they related to the space created between us and participants, and social positions and positioning (Anthias 2001). We do this by analysing the ways in which power is infused along multiple intersecting axes and how social categories and markers positioned us and our research encounters along vectors that were ascribed and self-identified, and always evolving and shifting. We also show how performativity, shifting boundaries, and othering came into play and shaped bordering practices and a sense of belonging. In doing this, we address the process of knowledge production and seek to contribute to an open discussion on some of 'the stopping places along the way', as described in the epigraph (Behar 1996, 3), and everyday dilemmas of ethnographic fieldwork among people on the move (e.g., Chase et al. 2020; Boas et al. 2020). We start by briefly presenting our doctoral projects, before we introduce the lens with which we approach intersections along multiple axes of difference and power in research on young people's journeys.

Multiplicity of movement beyond boundaries

Our doctoral projects[1] focus on young people on the move in Europe. OU's research commenced in 2017 in the Italian cities of Palermo, Rome, and Ventimiglia, with 39 unaccompanied minors aged 14–17.5, with various legal statuses (age-disputed cases, asylum applicants, and without legal documents). Most were Eritrean, Ethiopian, Ivorian, Sudanese, Gambian, and Tunisian. After an initial interview, OU followed participants over 24 months and encountered 25 participants for a second interview and 14 for a third one. Participants' complex journeys led OU to Italy, Malta, Spain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK (Uzureau 2022). On her side, MNL conducted seven months of fieldwork between 2012 and 2015, mostly in Patra, with shorter trips elsewhere in Greece and to Italy and Turkey, in addition to interviews in Norway. MNL's 27 main interlocutors were 15–24-year-old Afghans who had arrived in Europe as unaccompanied minors. They lacked legal status in Greece and had either been granted international protection or refused asylum in Norway. Participants self-identified with at least six ethnic groups (Lønning 2018).

In this article, we seek to unpack social positions and positioning as they related to our fieldwork and the space created between us and participants. We start from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality offers a valuable lens to explore proximity and distance, given its focus on relationality and how identity categories intertwine to produce specific social experiences. Intersectionality emerged from African American women's scholarship and the recognition that multiple social categories come together, intersect, and hence 'shape complex social inequalities' (Collins 2015, 2; Crenshaw 1991). Accordingly, 'race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena' (Collins 2015, 2). As with third space, it entails 'a both/and also logic' (Soja 2009, 50). We privilege a focus on gender and dimensions of race in our analysis. We also explore intersections with age, sexuality, place, nation, citizenship, and class. Through this, we show how intersections along multiple axes of difference and power helped all participants, including researchers, to feel, among other things, safe and unsafe, located and dislocated, and visible and invisible.

Spaces marked by gender, age, and safety

The migration of unaccompanied minors to the West relates to gender, age, and race: the vast majority are 16–17-year-old young men predominately racialised as non-white (Menjívar and Perreira 2019). There is a tendency in popular imaginings and public discourses to portray racialised

young men on the move as risky and as potential aggressors of crime, terror, and sexual violence (Pruitt, Berents, and Munro 2018; Allsopp 2018). In contrast, younger children are perceived as helpless, innocent, and vulnerable, with a de-emphasis on their gender or stereotypical feminisation. There has also been a tendency of conflation, with 'womenandchildren' connoting ideas about 'deserving victims' (Enloe 1993). Such constructions tie into ongoing processes of location and dislocation, as well as hierarchisation, marginalisation, fixation, and, ultimately, othering. While gender, age, and race affect how people are read in contexts of migration and displacement, they were also central in structuring our research encounters. In this section, we explore the first two, in terms of how spaces of research were impacted by gender and age and intertwined with notions of safety and vulnerability.

Being women doing fieldwork mostly among young men meant that our gender stood out. It made us visible, raised questions, but also ascribed us to a position of concern and perceived vulnerability. People on the move, locals and humanitarians repeatedly constructed certain locations of interest to our research as unsafe for us. This affected our first impressions and navigation, but also how others saw and engaged with us. We did research across spaces that can be broadly defined as 'informal', 'restrictive', and 'humanitarian'. Those are spaces within makeshift camps and specific neighbourhoods; spaces where border management, immigration and child protection regimes restrict or otherwise direct movement; and spaces created by diverse actors to respond to needs in contexts of mobility and immobility. These spaces were overlapping, cast in terms of protection and securitisation, regulated by criteria of inclusion and exclusion, and included solidarity and competition. They involved multiple power relations and resulting vulnerabilities emanating from how individuals are positioned within them, based on aspects like gender, age, nationality, class, and legal status.

Expressed concern for our safety and our predominant interaction with young men rapidly drew our attention to the gendered use of place, but also to ways different spaces impacted our navigation. Concern for us was often articulated with reference to gender intertwined with worry based on our perceived younger age. As such, place was impacted by gender and age, and was read as potentially dangerous. OU, for example, experienced how an Eritrean man in Brussels recalled their first meeting in Ventimiglia, saying: 'I thought you were a *bambina* [child], and that you were staying with families [in the governmental transit camp]'. OU was thus positioned as part of a displaced population. Furthermore, by linking her to a protected place, and a specific legal status and vulnerable group, he also positioned her within the humanitarian regime and hierarchy of vulnerability. This hierarchy is enlisted by humanitarian actors and state authorities according to 'criteria of health, (dis)ability, age, and gender' (Heidbrink 2021, 990). It relies on narratives that individualise vulnerability, simultaneously obscuring both its causes and reproduction. Similarly, MNL was advised by two Afghan men on Lesvos that there were families in tents with whom to stay, if need be, thus raising concern for her safety and simultaneously locating safety within a family sphere. However, during five months in Patra, she did not come across any unaccompanied young women on the move. Nor did she encounter many people not of Afghan origin. This made both MNL's gender and Black mixed-race background stand out and, in turn, constructed the places of her research in Patra as sites mainly concerning the mobility and immobility of Afghan boys and men.

We experienced that entering research locations could feel like an intrusion, and even more so when these were places mainly occupied by men. This made us pay close attention to where we did not keep our gaze given general lack of privacy, intertwining safety and access with respect and gender norms. The fact of being lone women researchers among groups of men, including many we did not know and who did not partake in our research, also made us feel exposed. This affected the spaces of research and was influenced by factors such as us being novices to fieldwork, undertaking research in countries where we had limited local and linguistic familiarity, and perceptions of vulnerability. It resulted in limiting some encounters within informal and restrictive spaces, premising these on being

guided there or accompanied, and engaging differently in more public or humanitarian ones. Additionally, we were both granted permission to carry out research within NGO-run facilities. This offered a different access, such as to places reserved for unaccompanied minors, single women, and families. However, humanitarian spaces were not without complexities. They were affected by dynamics of specific neighbourhoods, actors present, opening times and criteria such as those called for by the hierarchy of vulnerability (Heidbrink 2021). These implications likewise affected participants' and our positions, as well as whether we felt safe or unsafe. Thus overall, gender emerged as defining for our ability and willingness to be immersed in certain places, while the spaces we engaged in entangled us in multiple power dynamics.

Informal, restrictive, and humanitarian spaces were present within our main field sites, the Italian border city of Ventimiglia and the Greek port city of Patra. Border areas, as well as people inhabiting them, can singularly be represented in terms of marginality, crisis, and as in-between, but they also reveal ongoing processes and life trajectories embedded in diverse historical and sociocultural contexts (Cabot 2019). Marginal places are also sites of significant social and relational practices. While we perceived spaces of our fieldwork as transient and even chaotic, our notions of safety within these also expanded. This was mainly caused by familiarity, experience, and trust. Just like some young people came to trust us with their experiences and gave their consent to participate in our research, we too came to trust them and were dependent on participants to navigate field sites, and as such entrusted them with our safety. It entailed *risking* but also *surrendering* – taking the chance to trust – not least for the young men, as engaging with researchers in contexts of irregular migration can be risky.

Equally to the changing dynamics in access to and navigation of the spaces of our research, and the related dynamics of safety and trust, we also experienced that with time, mistrust and politeness gave way to more complex opening-up and closing-off to social spaces as well as 'unexpected affective interstitial time-spaces' (Matejskova 2014, 32). The fragile safe spaces that emerged allowed some young people to share of what weighed on them, that also emphasised their capabilities and agency, despite extreme vulnerability. We experienced how trust elicited a mutual recognition of variously feeling safe and unsafe. It revealed relational vulnerability as a common experience, even if framed according to a gender binary, and premised on our different nationalities, class privileges, and legal status. By performing masculinity and protecting us as 'vulnerable young women' (see also Chase et al. 2020), for example, by insisting on accompanying us in environments deemed unsafe or offering us the only chair to sit on, the young men also showed care respectfully. Moreover, the back-and-forth process of trust that emerged created some ground for mutuality. Accepting invitations to where they lived or found shelter also challenged power imbalances and became part of reinstating social rituals by turning the researcher into a guest and the receiver of tokens of hospitality. As we further explore next, the space created between us was influenced by gender norms and shifting boundaries.

Gendered vulnerabilities, sexual boundaries, and 'not knowing'

Encounters during fieldwork can be marked by gender norms and simultaneously reveal unexpected spaces transgressing given performativity. Researchers may furthermore approach research encounters as non-sexual, but positionings may be re-negotiated during fieldwork through expressions of sexuality and desire (Newton 1993; Kaspar and Landold 2016). At the same time, marginalised and hard-to-reach young men on the move are variously constructed as 'Other', located within multiple formations of power and domination inside and outside of academe. In this section, we look at shifting boundaries and performativity as tied to gender, sexuality, origin, and class, in addition to how 'not knowing' is also part of the research process (Cabot 2016, 667).

OU is Algerian-Martinican and MNL is Norwegian-Kenyan by parentage. As such, we conducted our main fieldwork in countries other than our own, and among young men of other ethno-national backgrounds. This appeared to signify that we were removed from certain expectations based on gender propriety and social organisation of gender or bound by norms as imagined in other places. Khan (2020, 26) observes from her research with Afghan men in England that the 'alternative, transgressive, interstitial spaces outside convention and propriety' opened for sharing, herself being 'a British woman of mixed Asian origin' (Khan 2020, 23). Shinozaki (2012) points to something similar, that being Japanese made research relations with Filipinos in Germany free from fear of gossip and social control. This allowed for sharing without having to take account of intra-community dynamics.

Our positions may also have allowed more leeway beyond predominant gender and community norms. However, we also question how gendered encounters, performativity and context affected the space for expressing certain emotions. For instance, MNL only saw two younger boys cry in Patra, despite great difficulties and commonness of injuries experienced by people on the move there. This contrasted with emotions emanating from other sources of knowing and understanding such as written accounts, drawings, and graffiti and how feelings came to expression elsewhere. Similarly, OU found that most participants in Ventimiglia hid their tears. Still, they searched for reassurance and intimacy in their environs, and wanted to follow her around. We undoubtedly also lost nuances given our cultural and linguistic non-proficiency, even if as 'gaps in linguistic and cultural worlds leap out, […] people […] meet [at] the edges of their understanding' (Cabot 2014, 191). These edges reveal movement beyond boundaries in efforts to *still* meet. As such, they can be conceptualised as a third space, as a 'meeting point, […] where one can move beyond the existing borders' (Soja 2009, 56).

Female researchers may face sexism in the academy, from participants, and as 'lone women researching a group of male[s]´ (Khan 2020, 25). Our efforts to address some of what we initially perceived as potential implications of this in our fieldwork led us to take certain measures to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to our femininity. We both adopted a modest style of long-sleeved and loose-fitting clothes. Its implication became noticeable in the occasional comments on how we dressed, with young people sometimes enquiring about our religious affiliation in relation to it, if not besides it, in attempts to position us based on clothing style and appearance. In fact, enquiring about religion was common, and our imagined and real affiliations and knowledge had an impact on how we were positioned. We were also frequently asked about our relationship status. These facets could be part of an initial conversation or a deeper concern. For example, during a follow-up, at which point OU was visibly pregnant, the young Somali boy interviewed ensured himself of the involvement of her partner in a brotherly protective manner. He also asked about his skin colour and religion, imagining the contours of her growing family tree along those dimensions.

Doing research among young men, at times close to our own age, implied a need to negotiate a space allowing for care, empathy, non-judgment, and reciprocity, underpinned by clear boundaries. Our 'fieldwork took shape within dynamic processes of continuous boundary drawing' (Shinozaki 2012, 1822), although these manifested differently for us. MNL did not experience interlocutors challenging her personal boundaries as a young researcher of the opposite sex. This was perhaps encouraged by how proximity was not searched for physically, in addition to her non-conformity to prevailing expressed beauty standards and that she wore a band ring. For OU, however, while disclosing her committed relationship status, establishing a safe space for the longitudinal research also meant addressing undesired sexual advances. As such, research interactions can reveal a search for physical intimacy through flirtation, statements of sexual interest, or objectification, as also tied to dimensions of race (Ibeka 2022; Newton 1993; Kaspar and Landold 2016).

Sexuality unsettles power relations and challenges boundaries. As Allsopp (2018) shows, gendered vulnerabilities of men on the move have received insufficient attention and they are often cast as

overly sexual. She underlines the importance of an intersectional analysis of masculinities, drawing attention to complexities and contradictions. Our participants emphasised countless risks of sexual violence for girls and women. Some also spoke of their own vulnerabilities and shared experiences that challenged normative ideas of masculinity and manhood. Several of OU's participants spoke about non-consensual sexual advances from female peers, social workers, and volunteers. Some of MNL's interlocutors spoke about fear of sexual violence, of having witnessed it committed against others, or being inappropriately approached by men in countries they travelled through. A couple also raised non-consensual sexual advances, their efforts to deal with these, and that they had not disclosed it during their asylum interviews in Norway.

We saw it as paramount to adopt an approach that 'commands us to show sensibilities towards [a…] fundamental right to opacity,' as we sought insights into the young peoples' experiences (Khosravi 2020: 294). Accordingly, 'not *everything* should be seen, explained, understood, and documented' (Khosravi 2020, 294; emphasis in the original). In following trajectories longitudinally, OU also met resistance to being located. In asking one participant on social media where he was, he followed up with their usual method: his location on Google maps. However, on this occasion, OU was unable to read it as the red dot was in the middle of the ocean. She interpreted this as the young person asking her to leave him alone. Our research included rich kinaesthetic and sensory experiences, but as Mukhtar,[2] one of MNL's interlocutors in Patra, said to her: 'You've gathered a lot of information about this situation, but you haven't lived it, the homelessness, without anything… There's a big difference.' In line with this, 'not knowing' is also part of the research process (Cabot 2016, 667). By pointing to his own destitution, Mukhtar also raises the importance of class, an aspect that fundamentally marks trajectories and modes of migration pursued. People on the move may also suffer from the criminalisation of poverty. And migration variously affects social class position, differently read across contexts and intertwining with long-lasting ties. Next, we turn to ways dimensions of race, and colonial and imperial histories are also part of research encounters.

Migrant background, colonial histories, and dislocation

Implications of social categories and markers come to expression and intertwine with specific histories and imaginaries. Different contexts carry different vectors as tied to space and place, as 'bodily markers themselves are cultural and historical' (Brown 2005, 125). In this section, we address ways visible migrant background and colonial histories became part of our research encounters, and how they instigated feelings of being located and dislocated in connection to place, nation, and citizenship.

We experienced being positioned as non-threatening and vulnerable due to our gender and age, as discussed above, but our positioning also intersected in particular ways with the visual categories of race. Our features and skin colour simultaneously made us invisible and hyper-visible. In the locations of our research, our phenotype emphasised an otherness as doctoral candidates. In a way we stood out because we challenged the habitual perceptions of the expected (white) European researcher (Ibeka 2022). This also related to configurations in the field sites, as we were often misread for cultural mediators or as on the move ourselves. It entailed 'being sent "elsewhere" […as] a performative migratising repetition of displacement' (Tudor 2018, 1064), not part of our own biographical histories of movement but our generational ones. This positioning also revealed a discrepancy between our identities, how we were racially defined and the available racial categories at hand (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009). In other words, the spaces of research influenced our identifications, how we were read by others and the contours of available boundaries.

Our Black mixed-race background and status as researchers elicited uncertainty and us as hard to locate or out of place, and, therefore, as in need of location. Such experiences are also raised by other scholars. For example, Fisher (2015, 458) experienced participants reconstituted her as white in the

Philippines, despite being a 'bi/multiracial Western woman of New Zealand Māori/Pākehā descent'. And during her research in Honduras, Mollett describes how she, as African-Canadian, was repositioned by her indigenous Miskito host as *meriki siksa*, a Black (white) foreigner (Faria and Mollett 2016, 85). This attests to how imaginings of blackness eventually gave way to being read in terms of privileges associated with whiteness. As such, dimensions of race and racialisation are imbued in performative processes and intersecting relations of power based on features, skin colour, position, and language, among others (Fisher 2015), as 'socially, culturally, and politically constructed' (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009, 22). The resulting dislocations and misrecognitions reveal multiple ways people understand the relationships among race, place, nation, citizenship, and class (Brown 2005).

We did not share participants' diverse origins, but found that a visible migrant background, as a racialised minority, often opened-up for an initial proximity. The young people commonly positioned us within a history of migration, often detailing their reflections as they retrospectively shared their first impressions of us. Our physical features and other markers carried different imaginings according to which we were initially positioned, attesting to how provisional positioning gave way to others. The content of these were locational, situational, and relational. On the one hand, OU was told by Palermitanis that she could 'pass' for Sicilian, inscribed in a local context in which Palermo's cosmopolitan heritage was revived. At the same time, several participants shared that they felt negatively perceived as Black Africans living in reception facilities in Italy. On the other hand, in the settlements in Ventimiglia, OU was generally assumed to be an Arabic cultural mediator by North Africans and to be Habesha by Ethiopians and Eritreans. The latter would refer to her complexion and hair texture and used the Amharic word, *konjo* (beautiful), to compliment her, attesting to how OU also embodied valued beauty ideals. Similarly, MNL experienced that those approaching her with initial recognition were either of African or Middle Eastern origins, emphasising her physical characteristics or addressing her in Arabic. Some rare encounters revealed further markers such as shared Kenyan descent or alternatively, being labelled a 'half-cast', an administrative British colonial term tied to the pathologizing discourse of miscegenation and rooted in an in-betweenness (Brown 2005). The term, moreover, hints at hybridity, a transgressive term in contemporary cultural analysis and simultaneously 'a loaded, historical [colonial] term' (Mitchell 1997, 539). An Afghan man also read MNL in terms of his own region's history when she addressed him in Iranian Persian. He mistook her for Afro-Iranian, referring to her as 'the Black Iranian woman', pointing to the centrality also of language and accent in such positioning.

In line with this, we were often asked for further explanation when presenting ourselves as French and Norwegian. Our nationalities introduced an element of confusion and were on occasion challenged. It was as if our Black African heritage could not be encompassed by this identity marker alone, eliciting prevailing ideas about race and national belonging (Brown 2005). The young people often expressed puzzlement at OU's Algerian-Caribbean background. While they could place Algeria on a map or had even been there, none had heard about the French overseas territory, Martinique. They seemed to make sense of her identity and belonging foremost in terms of citizenship.

Citizenship was also an important category in the young Afghans' positioning of MNL. Some would also ask when she was granted legal status, upon introducing herself as Norwegian. Still, for her, the question, 'where are you from?', has several potential answers along the lines of influence, sensibility, language, accent, and name, as feelings of home have arisen and dissolved in various places leaving traces of multiple (be)longings. MNL's navigation of belongingness and differentness could elicit a recognition, as some participants had grown up in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and located home across multiple places. The Persian term for mixed-race, *durage*, moreover, became a meaningful category of explanation, further probed through positioning along MNL's maternal and paternal lineage and country of birth, thus also imbuing place with meaning across generations. One

interlocutor, Ebadullah, articulated it in terms of privilege, stating: 'You are […] very lucky. You were born in Norway, right?' He thus raised implications of his own position as also a first-generation immigrant, and how defining place of birth can be in structuring life trajectories, hinting at how he had attained safety and an education only outside the country of his birth.

Colonial and imperial histories also emerged in our interactions with young people. France's colonial project encompasses OU's heritage. Different hierarchisation of Algerians, Martinicans and other subjects from former colonised territories extends within a self-proclaimed 'colour-blind' contemporary France (Sharpley-Whiting and Patterson 2009). Most participants in OU's research similarly located their origins to countries that had been colonised, and she sensed a testing of shared colonial history (Shinozaki 2012). However, distinct histories and variegated racial and colonial subjugation was also raised. Some of OU's participants shared videos of activists denouncing the CFA Franc monetary cooperation between Africa and France and asserted her position. Some, originating from countries formerly colonised by France, also expressed how eventual opportunities to become French citizens raised feelings of conflicting loyalties, where legal safety in France was perceived as both an achievement and a betrayal.

Moreover, some spoke of everyday racism tainted by colonial fetishism. One participant OU followed to settlement in France, named Boubakar, expressed feeling objectified by being labelled as '*mineur non-accompagné*' (unaccompanied minor) within the care structure, and scrutinised and compared in efforts to make him 'behave like a French child', himself being from Guinea. Similarly, an Ivorian named Issa detailed the pressure he felt when asked by care workers to 'integrate' into French society. Participants also tried to move away from pre-existing images of the child from the 'bush' who arrived by boat. These images evoke imperial 'France's civilizing and assimilative inclinations' (Sharpley-Whiting and Patterson 2009, 85), as well as cultural stratification between people of the African diaspora (Fanon 1967). This is reproduced through a psychological immigrant consciousness, ensuing from who is located as out of place (Tudor 2018). Place is therefore also a form of power, dependent on how people are positioned within it (Brown 2005). Such aspects also resonated with OU's biography. Having a transracial adoption history and a visible African heritage has deeply influenced her subjectivity. It has created an ontological fluidity regarding racial identity and overall sense of belonging within postcolonial French society deeply structured around discourses on identity and integration. Despite their different legal status, Boubakar's experience resonated with OU's own, as a French national with a visible migrant background.

Some of MNL's participants also expressed grief at being perceived as a particular group of young men. Often, this was based on stereotypes drawing on colonial tropes of backwardness, female subjugation, and images of the Taliban, along with feeling stigmatised as asylum-seekers and the racialisation of Muslims and anti-Muslim racism more broadly. For example, Shafiqullah explained how he tried to resist this in a conversation with a care worker in Norway, saying: 'I am from Afghanistan, there is war, but everyone's not stupid. [Anders Behring] Breivik is also Norwegian. Why did he [carry out the 22 July terrorist attack]? Everyone is not the same.' A few also felt lack of connection to Afghan society. Regarding his first time ever in Afghanistan, upon return from Europe, Sina said, 'my behaviour was not like theirs. I was born in Iran and [experienced], you know, progress.' Certain narratives evoke fantasies of the 'Other', whether located near or far. According to Trouillot (2003, 24), refugees are positioned among contemporary imaginings of the 'Savage Other'. This figure was crucial in the constitution of the West and has historically intertwined with research as part of colonial and imperial practices of power and domination (Trouillot 2003). Research also enacts 'a hierarchization of which people, things, situations, and places are worthy or deserving of study', with its own modes of attempted 'saving' (Cabot 2019, 262).

Our research also included young people who expressed pride at resisted colonialisation, even if their countries of origin were affected by imperial ruins, regional power struggles, and war. For instance, there were three Anglo-Afghan wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. MNL's Kenyan heritage also concerns the British empire. Furthermore, Norwegians also engaged in the external colonial enterprise under Denmark and Sweden at the time (Palmberg 2009). As such, our histories are intertwined with colonial exploitative and ideological processes, in addition to more recent armed conflicts, such as the 2001–2021 War in Afghanistan, and ongoing externalisation and outsourcing of the European border regime. The young people positioned France and Norway in terms of power imbalances and military interventions, as well as the possibility for protection, freedom, and human rights, and us and our research on both sides (Villenas 1996). In the next section, we show how dimensions of race and citizenship also hold implications for practical safety and visibility.

Bordering practices and visual categories of race

The many stopping places along migration routes are imbued with intelligibility, racialisation, and discrimination. They also present various legal interpretations and formal and informal practices carried out by actors at regional, national, and local levels. Accordingly, different bordering practices manifest in people's everyday navigation of safety and unsafety and classification as visible or invisible between borders. In this final section, we explore how such navigation and classification emerge in connection to visual categories of race, citizenship, legal status, nation, class, and place.

MNL's initial arrival in Greece coincided with 'Operation *Xenios Zeus*', the authorities' plan to identify, detain, and return irregular migrants. Named after the ancient Greek god of hospitality, it included large-scale identity checks targeting individuals with a visible migrant background. MNL was advised by humanitarians to carry her passport and warned that it might be perceived as forged. She therefore became very aware of how she was constructed as a visible racialised subject and, at the same time, as potentially 'illegal' and as a target for control. Moreover, on one day of leisure in Athens, upon spotting the banners of a pro-nationalist march heading in their direction, a Greek friend urged MNL to hide in a shop. This episode had an impact on how she saw herself and potential implications in the use of place in the country of her main field research, a country situated at the margins of the West and itself subjected to orientalising tendencies (Cabot 2014). Young people, moreover, spoke of racist verbal and physical abuse. Experiences of racism, xenophobic violence or confrontation may therefore be shared by participants and researchers in contexts where both are racially marked out. New contexts can also involve unbeknownst racial ascription and categorisation, as well as challenge known boundaries (Kusow 2003; Tewolde 2021). This can easily result in a homogenisation of people with common heritage, obscuring dissimilarities that reveal very different social positions. As already seen in terms of how gender, age, and race figure into constructions of young people on the move, consequences of being marked are intimately impacted by discourses on given groups. Below, we further look at how consequences are also affected by the protection that certain nationalities and class privileges offer, the power of institutional affiliation, and the voluntary nature of researchers' presence and possibility to leave.

Differentiated access to mobility is structured by nationality and citizenship, as also hierarchised within Europe (Tudor 2018), and beyond this, by class. Our Western European citizenships and doctoral fellowships provided us with legal and material means to undertake extended multi-sited fieldwork. OU experienced how participants were fascinated with her access to mobility and that she could travel everywhere and even follow them. She made sure not to influence their trajectories, but while she was a regular passenger, participants hid in train panels. She was acutely aware of the power imbalance this created. Our research included environments where borders were omnipresent, but these borders were also highly discriminatory. Although we could be ascribed an otherness, we were also confronted by formations of power that placed us as 'legal' travellers alongside those criminalised

as ‘illegal’ and deportable, and whose journeys were fraught with risks. Given contexts are therefore legally borderless for some and simultaneously entail an omnipresence of biopolitical borders for others. Our research also revealed how power shapes a reading of whiteness (Faria and Mollett 2016). OU experienced that a man in civilian clothing entered the back room of the migrant-friendly café in Ventimiglia where she was interviewing. When she enquired who he was, he showed a police badge, but only asked the cultural mediator and interlocutor for their documents. As recounted in her field note:

> The cultural mediator is very tense and nervously searches for his documents in his bag. The man checked them and asked about the girl. I told him that she’s a minor and that she sleeps in the Red Cross Camp. I asked Semhar to show her camp ID because in this situation, it is maybe the only thing that can prevent her from being sent to Taranto [the southern Italian hotspot].

This incident confronted OU with how she was ascribed an Europeanness and particular social class, leaving her feeling involuntarily complicit in the securitisation of migration. Bodies are therefore not only read in terms of visual categories of race, as this ‘takes its changing and contradictory shape in dynamic interaction with other forms of power’ (Brown 2005, 9). Although people may belong to the same diaspora, like OU and participants, diasporic experiences are gendered, marked by power asymmetries, distinct histories, and (post)colonial relations (Brown 2005).

The ‘border spectacle’ is visible in border areas in a multitude of ways (De Genova 2013). It does not necessarily entail spectacular crossings (Boas et al. 2020) but still impacts the space created between researchers and participants. MNL tried to be discrete, for instance, by only engaging with young people at the port of Patra who first explicitly approached her, as detailed in her field diary:

> There were many people at the port, lots running between the trucks in the parking lot and police cars driving back-and-forth. I tried to keep calm – not reveal anyone by stare, gesture, or sound. I noticed someone approaching but did not look until I saw it was Watandost. As the others had been chased out, he sneaked over to say ‘hi’ and ask what I was up to. He was soaked from the heavy rainfall. I worried the guards would see him standing there, so I tried to keep my eyes on the overall port rather than on him. He left almost unnoticeably after a while. I don’t believe he heard me saying ‘good luck’.

Later that day, MNL caught a glimpse of Watandost hiding in a truck. She received news the following day that he had made it to Italy. The way MNL interacted with this young man stemmed from worry about the ways such encounters involve risk through visibility, but her effort at mitigation introduced a distance. At the same time, presence at the port often led to proximity when next encountering the young people. Still, the distancing element increased the ambivalence she already felt by observing the ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova 2013), reminiscent of feelings evoked by the EU border regime she witnessed growing up in Spain’s outermost region. This combined with ‘a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write [and do] something’ (Behar 1996, 3). Such feelings encouraged MNL to take four months away from her doctoral research upon finishing fieldwork, to join an NGO focusing on child protection in another Greek border area during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. OU also experienced how the border affected the space created between her and participants. For instance, Noham asked on social media for financial support for his crossing from Belgium to the UK. He seemed upset when OU instead offered referrals and explained that she could not support him that way. Noham ended the conversation with ‘good luck with your study of the pitiful migrants.’ This conversation drew an invisible border between them, and they lost contact for several months. At the same time, encountering people across time and space increased trust shown to OU and acceptance of her in different research sites.

Just like we experienced not conforming to dominant expectations of European researchers or how French or Norwegian people 'look' like, as detailed in the previous section, the young people too were not solely confined by imaginings of their origins, and this also affected their sense of safety and visibility. As racialised hierarchies and stereotypes affect how individuals are read and positioned, it makes a difference whether one blends in or can capitalise on representations with more social status (Ibeka 2022). Some of OU's participants expressed feeling safer and less visible among African-descendant European youth, or at least until they opened their mouths. While many were fluent French speakers given a history of colonialism, they tried to conceal their accents, showing how this too works to make an immigrant population visible (Kusow 2003). Linguistic proficiency and accent may also be indicative of class but may not override how provenance and belonging are read according to how people understand the relationships among race, place, and nation (Brown 2005). A few young Afghans also told MNL how they had tried, with some succeeding, in 'passing' for nationals of other Asian countries known for tourism rather than war. They explained that conforming to such imaginings, which they related to physical features, clothing style and material objects, redefined their visibility and made them feel safer.

However, features that made some young people unmarked in Europe, also made them stand out in a context of irregular migration. For instance, one blue-eyed and blond-haired Afghan told MNL how security officials had disbelieved his nationality. Furthermore, some of OU's participants expressed that as Black, they would never comply with an imagined French identity, pointing to meanings of blackness as concerns questions of belonging in Europe more broadly. Such potential dislocation is reproduced through 'migratism' and how certain bodies are ascribed a migration and perpetually located as un-European (Tudor 2018, 1058). This displacement, in turn, fosters a sense of nonbelonging and constructs Europeans of colour as 'Other'. Or put differently, it proposes whiteness as an initial marker of Europeanness. At the same time, it obscures how Europeans are not a homogenous population and that Europe also extends through overseas territories, with Black Europeanness as inherently also 'a transcontinental identity' (Sharpley-Whiting and Patterson 2009, 89).

Conclusion

Villenas (1996, 729) describes the space emerging in her research as 'a fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion'. We also found the spaces created in our research as ones of movement beyond boundaries, yet intimately shaped by power infused along multiple intersecting axes of social categories and markers. In the foregoing, we have stressed the importance of paying attention to the situatedness and relationality of gendered and raced ascriptions of sameness and difference within and beyond research encounters. We have also drawn attention to how gender and race intersect with age, sexuality, place, nation, citizenship, and class. Through examples of everyday dilemmas of ethnographic fieldwork, we have elicited the importance of paying attention to such often taken-for-granted social categories and markers and unpacked ways social positions and positioning affected our research process.

We found that our positions, as Western European researchers who share a racialised background with participants, opened-up to various dislocations and (re)locations. These were read through the prism and weight given to our migrant background, class privileges, citizenship, legal status, and which bodies are seen as belonging or not belonging and as visible or invisible in given places. This also tied into gender and age, and further played into participants and us as differently positioned embodied sentients of specific postcolonial contexts. In the assemblage of spaces of our research, performativity, shifting boundaries and othering were at play. These intertwined with specific histories and imaginaries and in turn shaped bordering practices and sense of belonging. We also see research encounters as 'crossroads between […] biographies' (Leung 2015, 10) and 'inevitably also about our

own stories' (Khan 2020, 239). Accordingly, we started to disentangle some of the subjectivities and histories of movement that we implicitly and explicitly carry with us into research in reflecting on our positionality. We also show how our subjectivities and markers were differently constructed and contested for us as researchers, despite our shared Black mixed-race background, gender, status as doctoral candidates, and similar age. As such, we acknowledge common experiences, yet de-essentialise and denaturalise socially constructed categories and markers of sameness and difference by paying attention to the multiplicities of ways proximity and distance is evoked.

Importantly, we do not want to romanticise our fieldwork with marginalised and hard-to-reach young men on the move. Power dynamics were ever-present, epitomised, on the one hand, by participants as an irregularised and researched group, and on the other, on us as European citizens and funded researchers of Western authorised knowledge. Our research revealed the situatedness of encounters and our inability to fully know or make known either our own subjectivities or the young people's experiences. We have also grappled with 'the limits of what ethnography can do to assist with, alleviate, or represent suffering' (Khan 2020, 7), our complicity in its causes and reproduction (Villenas 1996), and some of 'the stopping places along the way' (Behar 1996, 3). Our interlocutors searched for spaces to feel safe and belong during their journeys. Our interactions evoked how this also resonated in our research and histories, and how it affected the space created between us. Despite intersections along multiple axes of difference and formations of power impacting the research relationships, boundaries were dynamic and imbued with movement. In coming together, interstitial safe spaces arose from common efforts to meet.

Notes

[1] OU's project was approved by CNR Research Ethics and Bioethics Committee (Italy) and the Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University (Belgium). MNL's project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. She also spent a period in Greece prior to admission as a doctoral candidate and carried out an exploratory phase according to recognised ethical norms and guidelines.
[2] Everyone cited has been given pseudonyms.

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