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Towards an Ethnography of Crisis

The Investigation of Refugees' Mental Distress

Francesca Morra

Abstract: This article analyses the challenges posed by carrying out ethnography with migrants experiencing mental distress and living in conditions of multiple marginality (social and existential). Drawing on the notion of crisis, I consider the experience of disorder as an ethnographic object reflecting the intersection between the individual and the collective. This article examines how ethnographic practice can be applied to, and is altered by, the study of these experiences, asking: How are we, especially as first-time fieldworkers, affected by unsettling encounters? How do we react and respond to the crises of others? What use can we make of our own experiences of crises by developing new ways of practising fieldwork?

Keywords: crisis, dispossession, ethnography, intersubjectivity, mental health, positionality, refugees

This article examines how ethnographic practice can be applied to, and is altered by, the study of uncertain and not fully accessible experiences (Stevenson 2014). The analysis focusses on issues of positionality and intersubjectivity in the field, asking: How are we, as ethnographers, affected by unsettling encounters? What use can we make of our own experiences of crises? How do we react and respond to the crises of others? I describe my encounter with Lily, an Iranian refugee, and her efforts to make a foreign space familiar. After several years spent in reception projects without overcoming precarity, Lily felt a deep sense of loss and showed the marks of her struggle.

Drawing on the notion of crisis (de Martino 1977), I consider her experiences of distress as an ethnographic object in which the individual and the collective intersect – a critical conjuncture of social, political and historical dimensions, and individual trajectories. In his unfinished work on apocalypses, Ernesto de Martino (1964, 1977) argues that human beings are constantly confronted with a risk of radical crisis. According to the author, we are exposed to a permanent risk of loss of presence, of not being in any possible world or in any communicable intersubjectivity. Our life-worlds are on the edge of a collapse that we strive, by any means, to prevent or to redeem. De Martino describes psychic crisis as a lived experience of radical alterity. Crisis begins with a world that is changing, because it is losing its 'givenness'. From being something that is taken for granted, the physical world ceases to be perceived as familiar – 'domestic or domesticable' (*domestico e addomesticabile*), in de Martino's words. Therefore, crisis is related to the perception of being acted on and of being dispossessed. The author emphasises how the relationship between human beings and the world requires continuous investment, for it needs to be constantly re-established against the permanent threat of dissolution. This work of construction and reconstruction is a work of signification and symbolisation, through which the anxiety of crisis is contained.

By acknowledging the social life of crisis, I investigate its collective impact and political dimensions. Even when incomprehensible or inaccessible, the experience of crisis interrogates its social conditions: it is an act of interpellation, a turning towards the other instead of a radical foreclosure. Consequently,

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when considered as ethnographic objects, personal experiences of suffering can provide a critical angle on the social and political circumstances in which they take place and which they shape. However, to fully grasp the critical potential of such experiences, ethnographers should rethink how they observe and participate in the suffering of others. In other words, to understand its transformative potential, ethnographers should analyse how crisis resonates across the social space, by considering themselves as key representatives of that social space. The ethnographic investigation of crisis should therefore start from the ethnographer's crisis – that is, how fieldwork encounters affect, upset and change researchers.

Drawing on those considerations, I analyse Lily's experience of suffering, and of struggle, to understand the relationship between political and psychic forms of destitution, between disownment, misrecognition and the risk of radical crisis. I begin my considerations by describing my position in the field and how I was affected by the encounter with Lily. I saw how her distress resonated around, orienting people towards, or away from, her and thus constituting a relational space. By looking at my own moments of crisis in the relationship with Lily, how I was disoriented by her, I argue that her distress can be a tentative, momentary space of movement, imagination and even subversion.

Considerations on Method

Both this study's object and its methodology mirror my background and reveal from the very beginning the deeply personal nature of this research – and, I argue, of research in general. I started my career studying cultural and social anthropology, then I trained in psychology, and finally I went back to anthropology for my PhD research. Other than being a researcher, I have a clinical understanding of mental illness and experience with patients. This helped me initially to win the confidence of both the University Research Ethics Committee and various gatekeepers: they were reassured that thanks to my qualifications and experience I would have been able to carry out research with participants considered to be 'vulnerable'. However, my double gaze on mental illness also posed a risk of confusing, or misunderstanding, my role. As it usually happens, I started my fieldwork contacting NGOs working with refugees: at first, when reflecting on how to participate in the NGO activities, it was difficult to define what participant observation actually implied, and not to be identified as one of the NGO workers or volunteers. The problem stemmed not so much from participants' lack of familiarity with social research as it did from my discomfort in having to invent a role that to me was new, that diverged from my background and that made me feel exposed. Up to that point, as a clinical psychologist, I was used to listening to suffering in a defined setting, and my role was therapeutic. In the field, my position, intent and methods changed: I was interested in the social and political meaning of mental distress, and therefore I had to observe how it circulated and reverberated around. I asked myself: Did I have to take a distance to be a better observer? What kind of responsibility did I have towards my participants' distress? And what should I do with my own discomfort?

To find some guidance, I turned to literature about the tension between the ethnographer's involvement and detachment (Bourdieu 2003; Geertz 1974), engagement and distancing (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009), and fieldwork's intersubjectivity (Crapanzano 1980; Rabinow 1977). Then, day by day, I realised that I was becoming more and more involved in a different way than I had imagined. Sometimes, as I had expected, I was asked for practical help by both refugees and the NGO workers. I was comfortable with these requests, since I felt they helped me significantly with my research and since, by reciprocating, I wanted to redress the imbalance of fieldwork (MacClancy and Fuentes 2013). But mostly I was asked to be honest, transparent – ultimately, to be 'knowable'. They asked me to be engaged in the relationship with them, to fully participate with my thoughts, emotions and worries. This kind of involvement (and some of their questions!) made me feel quite uncomfortable, but also genuinely immersed in the field.

During fieldwork, I realised that ethnography is indeed something very personal. It is a praxis, informed by theory, or rather by the practice of other ethnographers, always rooted in the interpersonal experience of the researcher. Every ethnography originates from the researcher's personal dispositions, curiosities and character. His or her presence in the field is made explicit, becoming an object of reflection. Essentially, the ethnographic field is made by the relationships between observer and observed and the uncertainties, tensions and doubts that inevitably occur when encountering the other. As Michael Jackson puts it, when embarking on fieldwork, anthropologists experience 'a particular instance of boundary disruption' (2007: 170): at the threshold between the familiar and the foreign, ethnographers lose the normal balance between being open to the world of others and protecting their own sense of self. Therefore, the ethnographer should consistently practise reflectivity, which Jackson defines as 'the twofold movement that takes one out into the world of others and returns one, changed, to oneself' (2007: 156). But what are the costs of all this? And how are we affected?

According to Georges Devereux (1967), researchers are deeply upset by the investigation of other human beings. In his seminal work *From Anxiety to Method*, the author looks at the research process through a psychoanalytical lens, arguing that the unconscious communication between observer and observed raises anxiety. In these circumstances, researchers could therefore resort to methodology as a 'professional defence', to 'decontaminate' the research material by removing its emotional content – what resonates with them. When employed as a defence, methodology allows ethnographers to detach themselves from the emotional resonances raised in the research encounter, by scotomising, simplifying or intellectually systematising material.

For Devereux, such efforts can only lead to distortions. Indeed, when investigating human behaviour, it is neither possible nor desirable to remove subjectivity. The presence of the observer produces 'disturbances' in the field, while, at the same time, the field generates unconscious reactions – in psychoanalytical terms, a countertransference – in the observer. According to Devereux, a 'good methodology' considers countertransference and disturbances as research's 'most crucial datum' (1967: XVI). Investigators should cope with their own anxieties and be aware of their own affects, so as to use them as a creative source of information. In other words, researchers should allow the subject 'to reach – and to reach into – [them]' (Devereux 1967: 301), studying the echoes and the reverberations produced in the encounter, the disturbances occurring 'within' the observer. Ethnography can be very demanding, for it engages researchers completely:

> Understanding comes of separation and pain. To understand is to suffer the eclipse of everything you know, all that you have, and all that you are. It is . . . like the gown you put on when you are initiated. To don this gown you must first be divested of your old garb, stripped clean, and reduced to nothingness. (Jackson 2007: 164)

The ethical encounter with the other requires ethnographers to be vulnerable, 'to be reached into'. Then, their struggles, inquietudes and failures offer insight that could not be achieved otherwise. According to Jackson (2007), here lies the potential of anthropology. In shifting from the personal to the interpersonal, anthropology has the capacity to participate in people's struggles, inquietudes and failures, transforming self-centred reflections into research concerning other life-worlds and the stakes of existence.

The Empty Room

I met Lily in December 2015. I was conducting fieldwork in Turin, and I had been involved in the new university programme for refugee students. I participated in the programme both as part of my fieldwork and as a volunteer. My role was to coordinate the study group, facilitating senior students in helping refugee first-year students to adjust to their new environment. I was introduced to Lily during one of the first meetings of the group. We were talking about the first part of the semester and the impact of the university. Lily talked about her difficulties with the new language: she could not follow classes or figure out how to use her student page on the university website. We started meeting regularly in the library or in nearby cafés. I helped her find her bearings in her new environment, and I started to know her. Lily is an Iranian woman in her mid-forties. She has a degree in chemistry from an Iranian university and worked for many years as a manager of a chemical plant. After three years in Italy, first as an asylum-seeker and then as a refugee reliant on the humanitarian aid of the asylum system, she enrolled at the university to find some sort of recognition of her background – and probably of her sense of self.

Month after month, I got to know Lily better. She described her experience of migration in terms of loss: 'My whole world has changed', she said. After having fled Iran, she found herself deprived of material and social capital: her violent husband had taken her savings and her other possessions; she had lost her job and the socio-economic status that comes with it. In Italy, her status depended on her history of persecution. Her degree and her job experience did not hold much value. Also, Lily told me that her world had been deprived of communicability. During the first period in Italy, she was not able to speak Italian or English fluently and was therefore not able to communicate with others. Even after three years, she was often misunderstood, and could not understand others properly. She felt lonely, isolated from others. Moreover, she thought that she had lost her credibility. Doctors, project workers and people in general did not trust her words.

One of the issues that bothered her most was that she did not have her own house – 'a good place' to dwell in. In the last years, Lily had only a bed in different reception centres for asylum-seekers and refugee, where she felt 'sick' and weak and lost her hair:

> *Lily*: [Lily describes her first day in the reception centre, after months travelling across Europe and Italy] When I arrived, I saw the room, with just three beds. In the room, there were only three beds, nothing else. . . . I felt that . . . Lily, it's over. Lily, it's over. How long do you want to go on with this life? It's over, you want, you have to die, so all the problems will be over. . . . This house was a problem. Because, a room with nothing, just, as I told you, three beds. . . . A room that is . . . Empty?
> *Francesca*: Empty.
> *Lily*: Empty. When a person speaks . . . Echo. . . . With this, my problem began. (Lily, 28 March 2017)[1]

Lily's experience of dispossession is condensed in the image of the empty room. She finds herself in a space without objects, and she feels lost. She has left a world of familiar relationships, languages, objects and places, coming to an unfamiliar, uninhabitable space. How will she occupy, and move around, that space? How will she orient herself?

As Sara Ahmed argues (2000), migration involves a process of disorientation and subsequent orientation, of reinhabiting a second social skin. Migrants are bodies 'out of place' striving to become intimate with a new landscape: 'If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails' (Ahmed 2006: 236). The process is mutual: the social has its skin as well, and social spaces are shaped, and oriented, by the bodies inhabiting them:

> Bodies may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected. In turn, given the histories of such responses, which accumulate as impressions on the skin, bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling. (Ahmed 2006: 182)

The efforts to find a place, to become part of a social space, can be understood as a work of alignment, of being 'in line' with others. Ahmed argues that collective directions are performative, that is, they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions. They are 'well-trodden paths', routes created by the traces of past journeys: 'What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations that we have already taken' (Ahmed 2006: 31). However, there is still a possibility to take a different direction, a 'queer' or 'failed' orientation:

> For bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not 'in place', involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes. And spaces in turn acquire new bodies. (Ahmed 2006: 38)

Feeling Breathless

Lily's effort to dwell in an uninhabitable place – the empty room – has a cost. The space around her is poor, unsignified and unsignifiable. Her life-world has come to the threshold of a crisis. Here, Lily is deprived also of her capacity to act on the world, to make domestic the space around her. Instead, she feels the world is beginning to act upon her. Her narrative of the empty room continues, becoming entangled with that of her crisis:

> *Lily*: With this, my problem began. . . . My head, always problem, at night. . . . Slowly, it begins. [One night, Lily comes back home, finding the living room full of people. Her flatmates have invited some friends. According to the house regulation, night silence starts at midnight] At 12:00, everybody has to sleep. They go on talking loudly, drinking alcohol, chatting, chatting. At one, I told them: 'Please, I want to sleep'. But for two more hours . . . But then, a Nigerian girl told me: 'No, you've problems, you're crazy, and blah blah blah'. I said: 'Ok, tomorrow I go to the office and talk'. [They start quarrelling, and the other guests come close to Lily] I felt my asthma begin. I couldn't . . . [Lily puts her hand on the chest] How do you say that?
> *Francesca*: Breathing?
> *Lily*: Breathing, because I didn't have my inhaler. Slowly, at four in the night, I went to the hospital. . . . The doctor asked me: What happens? Why you have this? [Lily explains she has suffered from asthma in the past] I had asthma, for this reason. The doctor said: 'No, this is not for . . . You have problems for other things. [You are] a depressed, nervous person'. (Lily, 28 March 2017)

Lily goes on to describe what happened in the next weeks: life in the reception centre seemed impossible; she had other episodes of 'asthma', and eventually she started to feel on edge:

> *Lily*: [My roommate] thought that I snitched on her [with the project manager]. When I came home, she was angry at me. I had two, three, pills for sleeping.

> I have to take one pill for sleeping, but I was very . . . very sad. I took three, four, to sleep five, six hours.
> *Francesca*: You took more pills?
> *Lily*: Yes, so I could sleep. And for this, when I was asleep. . . My asthma began when I was sleeping. [Her friend lives in the room next to hers, and notices that she is not feeling well]. She heard that I was sleeping, but . . . I couldn't . . . [Lily puts her hand on her chest].
> *Francesca:* Breathe.
> *Lily*: Breathe . . . They called the ambulance, but I don't . . . I have forgotten a lot of things. I don't remember. I went to the hospital; they did a lot of tests. The doctor [got] angry when he saw the blood test and understood that I took medicines. They thought I wanted to die. (Lily, 28 March 2017)

Lily tells me that, when 'she thinks too much', she feels stressed and everything looks very heavy and she then starts having difficulty breathing. She feels sad, not able to enjoy anything:

> [Asthma] is still there. But I have to, I know, I have to control it. [She starts crying] I'm not . . . I'm not sad. But I'm not happy, never. . . . It's still heavy, always. . . . For me, it's difficult. My life changed a lot. . . . Ah, I'm sorry [her voice shakes, and she cries]. . . . Because in Iran, I was a very proud person. Now, not anymore. . . . Because all things are mandatory. You must [say] yes, yes, yes, to everybody. You can't say no. You can't choose, because this isn't your country. . . . For three years, I can't say no. This was difficult for me to understand. . . . For three years, always, always, to get things . . . I've fought. This wasn't easy for me. Because I'm tired. . . . Always, always, I think, think, think. . . . Last time I had my asthma, . . . I was alone. . . . I thought Lily, why are you here? You have to go back to your country. Why are you here? You are alone, with nothing. And then slowly, it began. . . . But I got my inhaler, and ok, Lily, stop. One, two, three, four. But I couldn't control it. One, two, three, I couldn't control . . . [Lily starts crying, and we end the interview]. (Lily, 28 March 2017)

Lily employs a term she knows well, 'asthma', to refer to an uncanny feeling, something familiar and at the same time disquieting. Different temporalities are compressed in a past experience that comes back to the present in an altered, but recognisable, form. Asthma is a medical term that helps her give shape to a disordered experience, associating it with something she is acquainted with and that she has already endured and overcome. Also, it gives a kind of legitimacy to her situation and makes her experience somehow communicable to others. It is a word acting as a foothold, a provisional reference point from which to start finding an orientation.

Hers is an experience of radical loss: Lily feels that she has been deprived of everything, even of air. She feels she is about to lose her life, and sometimes she even thinks of putting an end to all this. On the edge, she holds onto a steady object – a medical condition that is known and thus, perhaps, more manageable. She does what she has been used to doing: she uses her inhaler and counts to calm down. But it does not work. Her experience does not fit entirely in this object. She acknowledges that this breathlessness is something different, more unsettling. Still, even if inadequate, calling it 'asthma' offers a familiar landmark in an empty room, something to cling on to when crisis approaches.

The Ethnographer in Crisis

Lily's crisis was not just her own. When I talked to her, I was slightly bewildered. Her crisis, what she called 'asthma', or 'thinking too much', or simply 'my problem', confused me. It was an undefined object, an experience that for Lily herself was both known and unknown. She tried to find the words to describe it to me and, at once, to make sense of it. Despite the effort, her crisis remained unsettled, blurred and slippery. And this was the case not only for her but also for all the people around her – project workers, roommates, doctors, family members and, finally, researcher – coming in contact with it. However, much of my confusion came from my position: this was the first time I engaged with mental distress as an ethnographer, and I had to renounce a caring role and think of a different way to understand Lily's words, silences and cries. As Lisa Stevenson puts it, I had to look at her crisis as an image that 'can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it' (2014: 360):

> Ethnography, as I have come to practice it, entails being attentive to – even opening oneself to – those moments when the facts falter and when things (and selves) become, even just slightly, unhinged. (Stevenson 2014: 163)

In Italian, my mother tongue, I describe my feeling as *spaesamento*, a word composed of *paese* ('country', or 'village' – an inhabited land) and the privative suffix *s-*. *Spaesamento* expresses the feeling of being out of a familiar place and, more generally, of feeling uneasy and/or confused for having lost one's habitual reference points. With Lily, I felt that I could not rely on my usual coordinates, on that which I took for granted, and I was disoriented. As happened before during my fieldwork, I was touched by this encounter.

However, while following Lily around, I started noticing that I was not the only one who felt a sense of disorientation before her. At the end of the first university semester, we went together to a small association supporting migrants for the validation of non-European degrees and offering career guidance. We met with Laura, a case worker who was very kind, and who seemed experienced. Despite this, the meeting was a failure, ending in misunderstanding and mutual bother. The circumstances did not help. There was a linguistic gap between Lily and Laura, but the misunderstanding did not simply stem from a lack of language. Rather, it was precisely when we clarified Lily's intention not to drop out of the university and renounce the scholarship, even if this choice could hinder the validation of her previous degree, that Laura began to look confused and somewhat annoyed. At one point, when Laura asked Lily to show her Iranian university certificates, Lily started crying and remembering her past. We tried to reassure her, and she calmed down. We left the office with nothing done and in a bad mood. Laura looked exasperated, I was frustrated, and Lily was nervous, agitated and asked me several times what she should do. I saw similar reactions other times, with a social worker thinking that Lily was an 'unusual' woman, or the students' office worker being confused by Lily's 'failed' attempts to apply for the validation of her Iranian degree. After these encounters, Lily usually looked tired and upset. On one occasion, Lily seemed particularly distressed, and wanted to sit down. She felt out of breath, dizzy and told me it was her 'asthma'.

As Ahmed (2004) argues, emotions leave marks on people. We are impressed by others, others impress upon us: emotions are crucial to the very constitution of bodies, for they 'work to shape the "surfaces" of individual and collective bodies' (Ahmed 2004: 1). We are shaped by, and take the shape of, contact with others, and the work of emotions implies a constant, repetitive orientation and reorientation towards and away from others. In orienting myself towards Lily, I felt slightly disoriented. The mark left on me by this encounter is the feeling I name *spaesamento*, bewilderment. I could not identify just one emotion, and this is perhaps the reason why I felt disoriented. The impression she left on me was complex, multiple and, ultimately, ambivalent. I felt empathy and respect while, at once, I felt defied by her attitude, when she made choices that I perceived as firmly illogical and possibly self-harmful. I could not even choose a coherent reaction. Should I help her to get what she wants? Or should I persuade her to change her mind? In other words, I felt torn between reorienting myself in her direction, or trying to reorient her towards mine. All in all, it was the lack of a shared sense that puzzled me. I think about the failed encounters described above and how we were all reluctant to settle, to reorient ourselves. How did we come to this incapability of understanding each other?

According to Ahmed (2004), affects do not have a fixed referent: they are detached from particular objects or bodies; rather, emotions are produced as effects of their circulation across a social as well as psychic field. However, whereas Sigmund Freud locates those affective economies in the intra-psychic and in the history of the individual, Ahmed follows Frantz Fanon in claiming that the movement of affects between signs shows how past collective histories are alive in the present. Emotions are generated by contact, and therefore are not inherent in objects or bodies (despite our perception) but are dependent upon a certain history of contacts. Following these considerations, Ahmed argues that 'emotions work to align bodily space with social space' (2004: 70). Indeed, emotions generate not only a subject and an object, but also a community sharing a similar orientation towards the same objects. By sharing the movement towards/away from the object, the individual aligns himself/herself with the collective. Ahmed argues that it is precisely through this alignment that both the subject and the collective come into being.

In my encounter with Lily, I can trace the work of emotions and alignment described by Ahmed. We are both affected by each other, and I see how affects circulate between us and amongst the people she encounters: I am bewildered, Laura is exasperated, the social workers are sceptical and Lily feels upset and breathless. Our surfaces take shape through contact – through the historicity of past contacts with 'unusual', mature, well-educated, Middle Eastern immigrant women, and through our orientation towards and away from them. The economy of emotions works to align bodily spaces with social spaces. However, affects continue to circulate. Emotions are never fully contained into objects, and bodies cannot be perfectly aligned: Lily opposes a divergent direction, while I remain slightly disoriented.

Conclusions: An Incommensurable Discourse

At first, Lily's crisis appeared to me as a narrative about the paradoxes inherent in the asylum system, its work of 'refugee-making' (see Malkki 1995) and the experience of differential inclusion (see Bosniak 2008; Castles 1995; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). However, as I entered into her everyday life, I looked at her crisis from a different angle. She described as a 'fight' her efforts to find a house, some money and, recently, a job through which she began to recognise herself again. It was not a fight to repossess what she had been deprived of, but a struggle to rearticulate a liveable world. She endured in a stubborn effort to keep a space for imagination open, before settling into a world decided by others. In her fight, I see the 'painstaking labour' described by Ahmed and aimed at impressing upon the surfaces of the social, even if only with a wrinkle. It is costly labour and an uneven fight, but still produces a different genre of discourse. It is not only a comment, a description of her experience of dispossession, but also a critical discourse. Lily's crisis, and her struggles around it, are unsettling.

In *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011), Elizabeth Povinelli analyses how 'alternative worlds' and 'spaces of otherwise' endure, or decay, in late liberalism. Povinelli is interested in what she calls 'radical worlds', that is, in alternative, subaltern and countering forms of social life. For the author, radical worlds are not necessarily organised forms of social action; rather, they oscillate between being partially organised and partially disorganised, and between being something or nothing:

> The social projects . . . may not have the force to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world (becoming a counterpublic is an achievement), but they exist, nevertheless, in the Spinozan sense of persisting in their being. And insofar as they do, these alternative worlds maintain the otherwise that stares back at us without perhaps being able to speak to us. (Povinelli 2011: 10)

The 'parts that have no part' persist as an 'unrepentant alterity', creating an internal dissonance, and making ordinary social, political and economic logics tremble. Povinelli (2001) describes this dissonance, employing the notion of incommensurability, imagining the tension between the ordinary and the alternative as an effort to conceive the inconceivable. Povinelli understands power as a practice of commensuration of emergent new, various and variant forms: 'Put crudely, the liberal national form seems continually to reconstitute some nominal, and normative, we-horizon out of these publicly celebrated or scorned, but in any case seemingly economically vital, flows of people, images, and things' (Povinelli 2001: 326). Divergent forces are made commensurate to the we-horizon without the use of repressive force, but with 'processes of self-correction' and the 'peaceful public use of reason'.

From this angle, Lily's discourse is unintelligible because it cannot be translated. Both her crisis and her moral horizon guiding her choices represent an alterity – sometimes a radical alterity. It confuses us because we cannot make it commensurate with our own vocabulary. And how do we react to this confusion? Povinelli argues that divergent and diverging trajectories are tolerable in so far as the we-horizon is not threatened: we can conceive 'an otherwise' as long as we are not 'undone' by it. Lily's discourse is disorienting, and thus critical. In other words, the crisis of her life-world, and her opaque efforts to reconstruct a liveable world, pose a risk of crisis for our own horizon. We are challenged by an imaginary that, even if it is not, or at least not fully, commensurable, represents a possibility of action – instead of being acted upon.

Crisis, other than being an individual experience of suffering, entails a claim. In the encounter with Lily, I represented the ordinary, the we-horizon that she was questioning. Lily's crisis exposed me and my reference points to a risk of crisis. I felt disoriented, particularly because it was my first experience of fieldwork. Without too much experience, I felt vulnerable, exposed and thus perhaps more receptive. The dissonance created by Lily's disorganised, indistinct interpellation disturbed me, and I had to invent my own way of considering both her and my experiences of crisis as ethnographic objects. I learnt that to speak about Lily's potential social critique, I had to start from how Lily was critical to me. Indeed, the researcher's subjectivity, what is most personal and even idiosyncratic, can become her most valuable material if considered honestly, and in its wholeness. By being simultaneously exposed and responsive to others, ethnographers bear the marks left by field encounters and come, finally, to embody their research. Ethnographic writing can thus be understood as an effort to articulate a narrative from the traces that the engagement with crisis leaves on the researcher. Those traces, and how they changed me, became the testimony of crises' social resonance and transformative potential. The challenge is to grasp crisis' unsettling potential and to make it communicable without resolving it.

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Note

1. The excerpts are taken from two interviews. One was recorded on 27 September 2016 and was originally held in Farsi, with the help of an interpreter, and then translated into English by myself. The second (28 March 2017) was held in Italian. The transcripts in this article are my translation. Lily is a pseudonym.

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