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The use of smartphones and the quest for a future among West African men in reception centers in Italy

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Abstract: In this article, I will analyse the creative use of smartphone by West African men living in reception centers in Torino, in Italy. As the usurpation of time has become an integral part of the European border regime, I place migrants' media practices in relation to their claims for temporal justices. Drawing on ethnographic data, I argue that the use of smartphones – and especially the making and sharing of images – represents a practice of future making, which is linked to the dimension of hope and desire more than that of nostalgia. After having considered the mobile phone as an instrument for "killing time" during the slow daily routine of the reception centers, I will go on to analyse how the skillfully crafting of one's own virtual image helps to carry out migratory projects and to obtain a residence permit. Finally, I will turn my attention to the materiality of the smartphone. As an "object of desire," it is part of a chain of gifts and counter-gifts capable of unlocking new scenarios through the creation of relationships. I conclude that the smartphone can be seen as a weapon in the battle over time which is proper of contemporary migration politics and governance.

Keywords: Smartphone; Mobile photography; Forced migration; West Africa; Italy.

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Introduction[1]

A young Ivorian man was about to leave the emergency reception center[2] in the province of Torino, where he had lived for the last two years. He was moving to Malta where he hoped to finally find a job. The refugee recalled his experience with these words: "I arrived in Italy, I knew that when you arrive and you have no documents, you are nothing. I accepted that and I stayed put for two years. Only ate and slept. Now I have documents and can no longer continue to just eat and sleep. It's time to get up"[3]. Demba, a young man from Mali with a two-year humanitarian permit, expressed a similar sensation of time slowed down. "You need to have patience, it takes time"[4], he commented when faced with the umpteenth unanswered job application. Meanwhile, an asylum seeker from Mali named Djibril described his particular perception of "empty" time as spending afternoons "waiting in the park"[5].

Many researchers have shown that in the reception centers asylum seekers and refugees tend to experience time as "suspended" in a sort of perpetual present. Their days follow one another, each the same, month after month, year after year with the hope of achieving some type of protection and finding a job (cf. Jacobsen, Karlsen, Khosravi 2021; Marchetti 2016: 126; Pinelli 2008, 2015: 13). That is how the experience of asylum seeking tends to transform itself into an ordeal of waiting, made particularly stressful by the uncertainty of the outcome and the duration, since the procedure times can vary considerably. Some asylum seekers, for example, are heard by the Torino Territorial Commission a few months after having formalized their international pro-

1. I would like to thank the cooperatives that welcomed me inside the reception centers they managed, the staff, and all the asylum seekers and refugees I met during my research. Some of them have become dear friends and for that I am grateful as well. Finally, I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on my article.
2. The emergency reception centers (knows as CAS, *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinari*) were opened in 2014 at the request of the Interior Minister to accommodate and discipline the growing number of foreign citizens who disembarked along the Italian coastline and could not find accommodations within the ordinary system of the large governmental centers (CARA) and the territorial projects (SPRAR). CAS are run through the prefectures in collaboration with cooperatives, organizations and hotel facilities. This emergency solution has been protracted over time, such that during my field research most of the asylum seekers in Italy were housed in emergency reception centers (Marchetti 2014: 61, 2016: 137; Colucci 2018: 172). In 2017, Italian CAS housed around 170,000 people (source: Interior Ministry).
3. Adama, 13 October 2017. To protect the anonymity of my participants, I have used pseudonyms.
4. Demba, 13 September 2017.
5. Djibril, 5 January 2018.

tection request. Meanwhile, others wait for more than a year to be called, without any explanation on the part of the police headquarters or the prefecture, regarding the reasons for the delay. The unpredictable waiting times are due to the malfunctioning of the system but also represent control tactics and management techniques used on the migrant subjects which have been actively refined by the state authorities (Pijpers 2011: 432). In this respect, Ruben Andersson (2014) considers the active usurpation of the migrants' time as an integral part of the European border regime. In his words, temporality has become a "multifaceted tool and vehicle – even a weapon of sorts – in the fight against [...] migration" (Anderson 2014: 2). In this "battle over time" (Anderson 2014: 5), however, the migrant subjects are not passive but have put in place various forms of reappropriation of time that constitute "claims for temporal justices" (Fontanari 2017: 26).

In this article, I will analyse the use of smartphones by West African men living in reception centers in Italy as a "weapon" in this battle for time. I will neither look at new information and communication technologies as instruments for keeping in contact with "one's own past" and assuring a "co-presence" in the homeland and the host country (Diminescu 2005; Baldassar 2008; Madianou 2016). Nor will I analyse smartphones as devices in the hands of "smart refugees" (Dekker *et al.* 2018) for "illegal" border crossings (Gillespie, Osseiran, Cheesman 2018; Kaufmann 2020: 173; Wall, Campbell, Janbek 2017; Zijlstra, Van Liempt 2017). Instead, in these pages I will consider how mobile technology helps the migrants to "end" the journey and build a life in Italy. In this sense, I argue that the use of smartphones – and especially the making and sharing of images – represents a practice of future making that enables forced migrants in reception centers to exert a certain control over their own future. Working against the grain of the European border regime's temporality, the smartphone does not involve collective and open contestation to change the system (it can happen, but that is not its most common use); it rather entails a form of "individual self-help" (Scott 1985: 29) to survive the system. In this regard, it recalls a "weapon of the weak," in James Scott's sense of the term (1985; cf. also Iroulo 2021) to the extent that it implies silent everyday forms of micro-resistance that eschew direct confrontation, being hidden behind the mask of public compliance (Scott 1985: 34). This "oblique" mode of action encounters an equally "oblique" counter-offensive, exemplified by the continuous commentary of the case workers in reception centers, who reproach the forced migrants for their excessive

use of smartphones (even if they are aware that they too are always online) and give paternalistic advice to learn to be disconnected and enjoy in-person interactions. This de-legitimation of forced migrants' media practices echoes (and forcefully brings into their everyday lives) the more general indignation of Italians (and Europeans) towards the digitally connected refugees, dismantling the image of suffering and empty-handed victims which are welcome in so far as they are incapable of any autonomous action (Leurs, Ponzanesi 2018: 6).

After having considered the mobile phone as an instrument for "killing time" during the slow daily routine of the reception centers, I will go on to analyse how the production and circulation of images of oneself online help to carry out migratory projects and to obtain a residence permit. Finally, I will turn my attention to the materiality of the smartphone. As an "object of desire," it is part of a chain of gifts and counter-gifts capable of unlocking new scenarios through the creation of relationships. The battle for time that I will delineate in the following pages takes place in situations of extremely unbalanced power, where in other instances, the same use of smartphones accentuates the condition of surveillance and powerlessness, through the datafication of migration (Allen 2020; Metcalfe, Dencik 2019; Madianou 2019; Gillespie *et al*. 2016). These considerations constitute the backdrop of this article that focuses on the creative use of smartphones by the migrant subjects.

The analysis presented is based on ethnographic research conducted in the province of Torino, a city in the North West of Italy, from 2017 to 2019, with young men coming from West Africa, who went through the asylum application process. I carried out participant observation, discursive interviews and digital ethnography. The research was also fed by my work experience as a social and legal worker, starting in 2014 and continuing through 2019. I did field research in reception centers, in parks, markets, legal studios, doctors' office waiting rooms and at associations frequented by my interlocutors as well as in the hallways of the police headquarters and in the waiting rooms of the prefecture, where Torino Territorial Commission interviews take place. Over the years the research spaces changed, given that many of my interlocutors left the reception centers. In some cases, they re-entered, after having left Italy "illegally" and submitted a new request for international protection in another European country. Although many of them arrived in Torino "by chance," from southern Italy transported by bus to a first-reception center in

an outlying area of Torino, those who obtained a form of protection and found work often stayed in the city, making Torino their home[6].

The emergency reception center of Alpignano, in a small town just a few kilometers from Torino, where I did most of my fieldwork, was not "typical." Its "uniqueness" was often recognized by those who lived there and defined it as "paradise" compared to other CASs in the area, because it was efficient and well run[7]. This CAS allowed me to observe the strategic use of mobile phones by the asylum seekers and refugees when the system works and is implemented at its best.

Smartphones for killing time

The smartphone is the quintessential "polymedia" platform (Madianou, Miller 2012; Madianou 2014). In reception centers migrants use them for telephoning, taking pictures, looking at videos in streaming, chatting, listening to music, playing video games, etc. to the extent that they always seem to have it in their hand. Its central role was highlighted both by the social workers – who accused them of their excessive use ("they are always attached to their phones" is a frequent complaint) – and by the asylum seekers, who considered it their most precious possession. Thanks in part to their pocket money, the investment in a mobile phone became their first purchase.[8]

The "attachment" to the mobile phone – which is certainly not specific to migrants – acquires a particular meaning if put in relation to the "empty present" that characterizes life in the reception centers. The various applications – first and foremost, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram – constitute some diversions for "killing time" and "distracting themselves," while making use of the Wi-Fi at the facility. After being in Italy for only a few weeks, a young Ivorian expressed his desire for a smartphone, not only to talk to his family in his hometown – often relatives were reached more easily by calling with a prepaid card – but also "to have something to do" and "to unload."[9] For weeks, in fact, he found himself in a situation of particular suspension, deprived of the possibility to go out of the CAS, waiting to be able to formalize

6. This confirms what was also found by Colucci (2018: 61), showing that Italy is not necessarily a country of transition. Those who obtain a residence permit and find a job tend to stay, instead of continuing their journey to other European countries.
7. There is extensive literature that highlights the shortcomings of the Italian reception system (cf. Altin 2019; Manocchi 2014; Marchetti 2016; Pinelli 2014; Pinelli, Ciabarri 2015; Vacchiano 2005).
8. In reception centers, people are entitled to € 2.50 daily, known as pocket money.
9. Daouda, 15 December 2017.

his application for asylum and receive a temporary residence permit. There were many asylum seekers who, like him, used their mobile phones to fight the boredom and stress and to help relieve one's "loaded head."[10]

Navigating on social media constitutes here a means of isolating oneself from the surrounding world and distancing, at least temporarily, anxieties and worries. In this sense, the use of the smartphone works as an "antidote" (Eriksen 2021: 60) to the empty time of waiting. Its healing ability comes with perils, though. Like taking medicine, it assumes a therapeutic value, soothing the pain, but "proper doses" must be worked out, in order to avoid adverse effects.[11] Djibril voiced this risk particularly when he sustained that "it's not good to stay inside at home all day sleeping, eating, going on Facebook, WhatsApp, it's not good…" with his hand on his head indicating the weight of these thoughts.[12] When they are abused, social media no longer work as means of evasion and connection, but accentuate the sensation of isolation and desocialization, which is typical of life in the camps.

Mobile photography and the question of visibility

When used strategically – and not just for "killing time" – smartphone apps can transform into an instrument for successfully navigating the uncertain situation of the present towards the future one desires. This happens when migrants are able to use social media to control the image of themselves that they project to others.

The question of visibility – that is who sees what – is crucial to forced migrants' lives. Zachary Whyte (2011) describes the asylum system in terms of the "myopticon." The reference is, obviously, to Bentham's and Foucault's panopticon (Foucault 1977). In a panopticon, the inmates are unable to know if the chief inspector is watching them or not. The uncertainty leads them to presume that they are always under surveillance and to internalize control. The situation appears differently among asylum seekers. They are aware of not always being monitored, as they leave the reception centers, go to Italian language school, attend churches and mosques, and, in some cases, work. Their concern

10. Salim, 1 December 2017.
11. Ambivalence about communication technologies is underlined by various authors. For example, Diminescu (2020: 75-76) compares migrants' ICTs to a *pharmakon*, that in Ancient Greece was both a medicine and a poison. Horst and Miller (2006) maintain, instead, that the use of cell phones in Jamaica resembles drug and alcohol consumption, such that it fogs the mind and relieves pressure.
12. Djibril, 3 October 2017.

is more about what the various authority figures with whom they interact (e.g. social workers, the police, lawyers and members of the Territorial Commission) see when they look at them, since the success of their asylum applications depends on the image of themselves that they are able to transmit. In fact, the legal-bureaucratic process of the asylum application is based on the telling of one's own life story so that recognition of international protection depends, to some extent, on the ability of the applicant to control their own representation (Beneduce 2019; Sorgoni 2013). Thus, there is the anxiety of being misrecognized, the sensation of not being seen or of being seen in the "wrong" way, the fear of being forgotten. The following example may help to understand the situation. According to the image they had of the asylum seeker (positive, exemplified by a "collaborative" asylum seeker, or negative, characterized by an asylum seeker who is considered to be "ungrateful" or "full of demands"), case workers facilitated or not access to information and people (such as lawyers), therefore acting as actual gatekeepers. As a young Gambian explained to a Ghanaian asylum seeker who had just argued with a social worker:

> Without these workers we cannot do anything, they are the ones who give us everything, everything goes through them. It's true that everything comes from God, but nothing arrives directly from God right now, everything passes through Francesca and Sara[13] [the social worker and the head of territorial reception services at the cooperative that run the reception center, respectively]. The most important thing at this time is to think about the Commission because these people [Francesca and Sara] can write things about us, they can help us or stop helping us and we can't do anything. I'm afraid of Sara! And you should be too![14]

On another level, the need to control what others see and know, structures interpersonal relationships among the inhabitants at the reception centers. At the center in Alpignano around twenty asylum seekers lived together, three per room. Despite being a well-run center where the case workers were attentive to the needs of the guests, some rules favored a situation of forced intimacy between people who happened to live together "by chance," without any previous acquaintanceship. For example, the immigrants had no compartments with locks for putting their belongings away safely and, in fact, things were often stolen. They were unable to lock their rooms and had to eat and cook all together using the same pots and pans. This situation was reminiscent of the idea of "intimate strangers" (cf. Ndjio 2006), characterized by distrust and

13. Also in this case pseudonyms have been used.
14. Bouba, 2 August 2017.

diffidence. Yet, simultaneously, there was a need to collaborate and establish relationships. This ambiguity encouraged an increase in speculation and gossip that generated a fertile ground for the spread of backbiting and witchcraft suspicion. In the words of a young Ivorian man:

> I have no friends at the camp… I talk to everyone, but here everyone thinks only about themselves. They put us here together, and because of this, we know each other. Here I talk to everyone but I don't tell my secrets to anyone. Nobody tells their secrets. You know… in Africa this is how we are, we have this thing about jealousy… if the others see, for example, that you have a work contract, they can become jealous and hurt you…[15]

As a result, people needed to reveal a little bit about their lives to avoid too much speculation and gossip, but without exaggerating and thus making themselves vulnerable. This was done through strategic openings and closings with each other. For example, a young Malian who had found a job with a contract kept the good news hidden to avoid creating jealousy. Jealousy could incite mystical attacks by the other inhabitants of the center, causing possible job dismissal.[16]

Finally, another important question has to do with the depiction of one's own life in Italy that is communicated to the family back home. Thanks to social media and smartphones, forced immigrants can always be reached by their relatives and friends at home who want to have information about their new lives (sometimes they expressly ask for photos and videos), along with financial help (cf. Tazanu 2012). Nurturing good relationships is essential, insofar as relatives from the home country offer both comfort during difficult times and prayers that help migratory plans to be successful. Once again, it's about maintaining channels of communication that are "controlled," balancing between disclosure and concealment. For example, a Nigerian asylum seeker had an internship that offered very low wages; he did not let his family know about his work in order to avoid having to send them extra money that he cannot spare.

Within this framework, mobile photography plays a central role. Whether photography has always been an important part of the migration experience, with the arrival of mobile phones' cameras connected to the internet, its meaning has, at least partly, changed. Photography is no longer limited to immortalizing "special" occasions such as births and religious ceremonies to be

15. Adama, 13 October 2017.
16. The spiritual insecurity and fear of witchcraft attacks concern not only immigrants who reside in the reception centers, but are part of the experience of many Africans who live in precarious situations in Torino (Beneduce 2004; Taliani 2016).

shown to the family back home. Instead, it enters into the everyday life of the migration experience, obtaining new roles and meanings beyond just bolstering memories (Prieto-Blanco 2016). It was not by chance that the guests at the Alpignano reception center photographed a little bit of everything, not only the noteworthy events. When I asked what their favorite subjects were, they had no single answer. In the phones' photo galleries, they kept self-portraits, group photos, scenes from everyday life, landscapes and consumer goods (such as cars and TVs displayed in stores), copies of documents of which they fear losing the originals, all mixed in with images of friends and relatives in various parts of the world downloaded from the internet and social media. This was a cluster, where past and present were combined, and important images were put together with insignificant ones that could be erased with no regrets[17] (Santanera 2018). When it came to posting online, however, they became much more selective in their choices. In the rest of this section, I will examine the strategies carried out by migrants to control the circulation of their photographic image among different audiences. To illustrate this point, I will recount the story of Bouba, an asylum seeker from The Gambia.

Bouba was 20 years old when he arrived in Italy. He comes from a well-off family from a village in the northern region of The Gambia where he lived with his extended family. His father is a tailor, and together with his brother, he runs a large shop. Bouba was still a student when he first came across some "beautiful images"[18] posted on Facebook by some fellow countrymen living in Italy and Germany. These pictures instilled in him the idea of leaving, of trying his luck in Europe. The allure of the photos, he recounted, "kept my mind from school. I said now I want to go to Europe… I made up my mind… they made up my mind for me."[19] With his thoughts already in Europe, he crossed the Sahara and arrived in Libya where he set off for Italy. After this extremely dangerous journey, upon his arrival, he was confronted with the difficult life of asylum seekers. Bouba felt he was deceived by the images which had made him dream in such a way and blocked the friends on Facebook who had posted them. He had few friends in Torino, either at the "camp" (the name he used to

17. Generally, the operative systems showed the images downloaded from the internet in the "gallery" folder, together with all the other photos taken (aside from saving them in ad hoc folders).
18. This expression was used by Bouba himself, 29 July 2017.
19. Bouba, 23 June 2017. This interplay between the flow of images and the flow of people shows the contemporary work of imagination, as understood by Appadurai (1996: 5). Similarly, Kleist (2016: 9) writes that in Africa social network consumption can foster migration and nurture the hope of living a better life in distant places.

refer to the reception center) or outside, among Gambian soccer teammates. "Making friends," he said, "is really hard, [...] one doesn't go beyond a hello and some small talk."[20] When someone asked him to be friends on Facebook, however, he became diffident, "I don't like this since I'm afraid of gossip. I don't want them to know too much about me because otherwise people can talk about me, say that I did this and that, they can hurt me. On the outside, they smile but inside they can be very dark."[21] This is why Bouba decided to cancel his old Facebook account and open a new one where he only accepted contacts from people he trusted. On the other hand, he did not let himself be photographed unless it was with his own cellphone. He did this to avoid the circulation of his image beyond his control, among unforeseen viewers. When friends in The Gambia asked Bouba to send pictures of his new life in Italy, he was reluctant. He could not avoid the request without seeming impolite and damaging relationships. He did not want to mislead others with false hopes, but he also did not want to show the difficulty of his present situation. Therefore, he decided to take advantage of the WhatsApp "status" option in which the photos he uploaded of himself were automatically cancelled after 24 hours and could neither be downloaded nor circulated.

Bouba's case shows that the spread of digital photographs online is part of the building and destruction of relationships, as in the opening and closing of possible futures. In particular, it demonstrates how digital photography, in its material dimension, allows forced migrants to strategically toy with the visions of others in a way that echoes the politics of secrecy, which is typical of cell phone use in other contexts (cf. Pype 2016a; Archibault 2017; Waltorp 2020). Migrants' "games" in Italy are especially "serious" because they draw into play the success of migratory projects, and the possibility of working and staying legally in Italy (without falling into the clandestine condition of invisibility). Thus, asylum seekers' online photographs not only evoke memories, affection and nostalgia, like analogic photography once did (Chalfen 1987); they can also be associated with feelings such as anxiety and fear. More than creating memories, functioning as "clocks for seeing" the past, they seem to deal with the dimension of the future. In this regard, the careful juggling between displaying and disguising, visibility and invisibility, represents a strategy to successfully navigate the uncertain situation of the present, towards the future one desires.

20. Bouba, 4 August 2017.
21. Bouba, 4 August 2017.

Images of the past, images of the future

Before he got on the boat from Libya to the Sicilian coast, Djibril copied the telephone number of a Malian acquaintance living in Italy onto a piece of paper. That piece of paper, laminated in order to be water resistant during the crossing, is the only thing he brought with him besides a little bit of money that he spent in Lampedusa to buy a cell phone. Instead, Seydou, an Ivorian asylum seeker, traveled with a SIM card. When I met him for the first time, he had just finished writing down all his saved numbers on paper. He would call them shortly afterwards on a reception facility mobile phone to let them know he had arrived safely in Torino. Bouba arrived at the reception center unable to carry any item from his past, not even the clothes in which he crossed the Mediterranean because they were wet and dirty so he left them on the boat that rescued him off the coast of Sicily.

David Parkin (1999) underlines the importance of the objects that forced migrants carry with them in their travels, not just the useful ones but also (and perhaps in particular) those of emotional and sentimental value. Like genuine "transitional objects," mobile objects help the mobile subjects to rebuild a sense of continuity with the past that allows them to imagine a viable future, acting as a bridge between "pieces" of a life which have been disconnected in a way that is often traumatic. This "self-inscription" in non-commodity objects is particularly crucial when people are required to interface regularly with individuals who believe they are not trustworthy. If one's own network of relationships cannot be invested in emotionally, non-humans temporarily assume the job of conserving the precluded social personhood and sense of the future, becoming bearers of pre-traumatic hopes (Parkin 1999: 308).

These considerations recall the context of the Italian CASs, where the asylum seekers must establish relationships with individuals who tend to treat them suspiciously, expecting something underhanded and dishonest from them. For example, the reasons for denial of international protection by members of the Torino Territorial Commission very often allude to the fact that the answers given during the interview are not credible, such that the so-called "interview preparation" carried out by the legal workers is generally filled with advice on how to appear "sincere" (for instance, directing one's gaze into the eyes of the commissioner while speaking instead of looking down, according to the usual way of showing respect in West Africa). Moreover, in staff meetings it is not uncommon that social workers begin to speculate about the deception carried out by the migrants to cheat on the weekly shopping; in other cases,

they insinuate that depression and psychological distress are simulated by the individuals to obtain medical reports to present at the Territorial Commission, with the hope of receiving a humanitarian permit (cf. Fassin 2001, 2005; Fassin e d'Halluin 2005, 2007). In this context, characterized by enormous distrust, the absence of "transitional objects" stands out. The lack of mementos from one's past risks to undermine the possibility of bridging the gap between past experiences and future potential, "for it is through the skills and objects one may take that one's future may be given shape, at least from the perspective of the departee" (Parkin 1999: 305).

Within this context, pictures, texts and videos circulating on social media may work as valuable substitutes for transitional objects, acting as supports for selective remembering, forgetting and envisioning future possibilities. Returning to one's social media profile after the long journey towards Europe is an emotionally intense moment where, retrieving all lost messages and posts of friends and family, is like rediscovering a familiar environment in the virtual world.[22] Upon arrival at the reception center of Alpignano, for example, Demba reconnected to Facebook for the first time after more than a year. He read the dozens of messages received from his acquaintances who, having not heard back from him, started to fear that he had died. The feeling of returning online thus became, in his own words, a "rebirth.[23] The news from home received periodically on WhatsApp is equally significant, because – similar to browsing Facebook and Instagram – it allows for a connection with who you were, that can function as the basis for imagining who you will be. As Bouba recounted: "I like chatting or receiving photos from my sister, it brings me back to my old life".[24] It is worth noting that transnational communications do not always have these positive effects; when the "bringing back" feeling and the digital closeness are too vivid, negative emotions – such as loneliness and despair – might prevail. In this case, digital devices become drivers for depression and passivity, blocking the possibilities of the future, as laying on a bed all day scrolling social media becomes the only possible coping mechanism for nostalgia.

In an interesting way photographs can play a crucial role in keeping a positive imagination of the future alive. While consuming texts and images of one's own home country allows for "recovering" pieces of oneself (when nostalgia is not too

22. As reported by Stremlau and Tsalapatanis (2022: 67), many sub-Saharan Africans do not have regular internet access during their journey to Italy.
23. Demba, 8 October 2017.
24. Bouba, 22 December 2017.

intense), the production of new photos represents a means for fantasizing about one's desired future. In West Africa, a certain visual culture has connected popular photography to the dimension of imagination more than to that of memory. Yoruba photographers of the 1960s-80s are key figures from this point of view; with their itinerant studios, they would travel around West Africa, spreading trends and styles that shaped a genuine photographic ecumene. Specializing in portraits of people, in their shops they offered their customers, through access to backdrops (for example painted skyscrapers, cars, interiors with televisions and refrigerators) and props (such as clothes, telephones, watches, and umbrellas), to be represented with emblems of modernity. In some cases, they also did retouching to modify physical aspects, making adjustments on the negatives with a pencil. Portraits made in this way did not strive to "fix" the subject in a specific moment of his/her development but, rather, tried to represent one's transformative potential. In this sense portraits from West Africa eschewed realism to create a space of performative involvement where one explores and "feels" new roles and images of self, anticipating possible futures (Peffer, Cameron 2013; Wendl 2001). These images were not conserved in albums but were given to relatives and acquaintances in order to receive compliments and elicit admiration. The far-reaching circulation of one's own "ideal self" helped attest to one's potential improvement. Furthermore, it contributed to accomplishing this, by placing oneself at the center of webs of extensive relationships and by building a reputation. These practices of self-display have continued on after the advent of mobile photography (Vokes 2019: 208-209).

In photos they posted on Facebook, my interlocutors looked into the camera posing in nonspontaneous ways, sometimes inspired by black hip-hop movements. Their clothing was also somewhat fancy and could include such gadgets as ear-buds and a mobile phone visible in one's hand. The background, when visible, tended to consist of cars and other consumer goods or monuments of Torino. These portraits can be seen, not so much as realistic representations of migrants' lives, but rather as visualizations of their aspirations. The appropriation of hip-hop imagery and the representation of oneself next to some luxury goods, in particular, can be interpreted as images of a desired masculinity. For young Africans, often trapped in situations of perpetual dependence (Cruise O'Brien 1996; Honwana 2012; Honwana, de Boeck 2005) that denies their access to full manhood (Fuh 2012; Dery 2019; Perry 2005; Shultz 2021), emigration constitutes a way of trying to reach the desired adult male status with an economic and social position that allows for having a wife

and maintaining an extended family, according to the widespread model of man as a father and a provider (Ammann, Staudacher 2021: 264). In the words of Moussa: "No one is happy to leave his home… but when you leave your home, you do so with a goal: to find a job and to help who is 'behind you.' I did that for my siblings because they shouldn't have a life as difficult as mine and because they may suffer less."[25] The expression "look for yourself in Europe" – used by many francophone Africans speaking about their decision to leave – evokes, among other things, this identity journey, where emigrating offers a space for reinventing the masculine self. In Italy, one often falls into a condition of helplessness and subordination. This can lead to the claim of power positions due to gender, at least in the online world, with an exaggerated performance of masculinity to compensate for the social and economic deprivation experienced in the offline life.[26] Clothes and poses used in the images on social media clash with those of the offline world, where it is necessary to keep a "low profile," so as not to attract the police's attention, in a climate where the representation of young African men as violent and dangerous prevails. "We can't go out in our undershirts…" Omar warned me, implying that on the streets of Torino one needs to resort to other performances of the self.[27]

Barbara Pinelli (2013) demonstrates that fantasy – understood as the hope of providing a prospect for one's future that is different from the present (Moore 1994) – is not simply evasion, but constitutes an impulse towards change. It acts as a first step towards the life one desires, in contrast to the sense of "stuckedness" (Hage 2009; 2015) that permeates the experience in the reception centers. From this perspective, the unrealistic portraits of migrants appear to be powerful affirmations of oneself and of one's own potential for moving forward in life, real agency manifestations. It is the ability to imagine change which ensures that, in the present, there is the possibility of finding the resources to "not give up" and of continuing the pursuit of one's projects. The wide circulation of images on social media contributes to reinforcing these dynamics. Posts, comments and "likes" enable one to cultivate a pool of "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973; Eriksen 2021: 66) that could be useful once a person has left the reception projects (Santanera 2018). The experience of an Ivorian

25. Moussa, 30 October 2017.
26. Charsley and Wray (2015) write that migrant men in positions of weakness may search for "hyper-masculinity," reasserting the dominant models of manhood, instead of rejecting them. Cf. also Pasura, Christou (2017) on the rupture of the sense of masculinity experienced by African men in transnational settings.
27. Omar, 12 September 2017.

political refugee seems to confirm this hypothesis. Upon receiving a travel document from the Torino police headquarters, he decided to leave the Alpignano reception center and move to Malta. The destination choice, discouraged by the social workers (who saw it as an island with fewer job opportunities and new language barriers), was made following a "survey" among Facebook contacts. The assessment ended up being on the mark. From the moment he was in Malta, he immediately found a job in construction along with a room to rent, thanks to local contacts he had cultivated over time on social media. Having put away some money, he returned to the Ivory Coast and finally got married.

The object of desires

One last aspect of the connection between mobile phones and the future concerns the materiality of its technology. The smartphone, besides being a means of communication, is also an object with its own social life (Appadurai 1986), that gets bought, given, lost, stolen, broken, fixed, re-sold, thrown away and preserved. In what way does the temporality of ICTs enter in resonance with the temporality of life in reception centers?

The smartphone occupies a very particular place within the CASs, such that it is one of the few objects that migrants purchase and choose freely (with the price acting as the only constraint). My interlocutors were familiar with the various brands and models on the market and changed devices as soon as their financial situations improved (for example, thanks to being a paid intern), searching for "nicer," as well as "faster" cell phones. Here desire plays a considerable role in contrast to the logic of need that generally governs the running of the reception centers. For example, Omar, a Gambian refugee, matched his clothes – a red shirt and light grey pants – with his white Samsung and its red cover that he had just bought, through a form of "everyday design" (Horst 2016) that enhanced the look of his new purchase. On the other hand, the social workers tended to label as superfluous anything besides the most basic necessities (cf. Porcellana 2016). This resulted in poorly maintained rooms, where various types of furniture did not match and were put together haphazardly, found here and there, at flea markets and sales.[28] The lack of an environment in which one could reflect oneself was painful, as these words from a Gambian refugee made clear: "Because, you know, when you live

28. In some cases, migrants personalize their spaces for example by hanging posters next to their beds. These personalization practices have been interpreted as forms of resistance (cf. Agier 2014: 18).

alone you can set up your room, put your things in there, whereas if you live with lots of people, you can't… Now I only think about wanting to find a job that gives me money every month to have my own home".[29] In this context, a smartphone – a "beautiful" personal belonging that is chosen carefully – is an object with a strong identifying value, that allows one to recover, in a miniscule way, a hint of the life about which one dreams for the future. As such, it is experienced as both a highly singularized object (Kopytoff 1896) and a global commodity that anticipates a desired life of consumption. To declare – as often happened – that one's mobile phone is "outdated" or "old" constitutes, therefore, a claim on one's own better future.

Another aspect of connection between the materiality of communication technologies and the dimension of the future emerges from the circulation of devices. In Africa ICTs have become quintessential gifts for lovers and relatives (Archambault 2017; Jordan Smith 2006; Pype 2016b). In Daniel's account regarding Ghana, "No money, no love. To have a girlfriend you have to at least give her an iPhone".[30] Also in the migratory context, smartphones continue to be embedded in gift exchange practices. To cite just a few examples, Bouba received his first smartphone as a gift from a Gambian acquaintance as soon as he arrived in Italy. Drissa got a mobile phone from a female Ivorian friend and two smartphones from an Italian woman. Despite needing money, he did not consider the idea of selling any of his phones because "one keeps a present, it can't be sold".[31] Koffi, also an Ivorian refugee, bought a Samsung smartphone for a compatriot with whom he undertook the journey from Ivory Coast to Italy. When I pointed out that the cellphone he intended to give as a gift was more expensive than the one he purchased for himself, he commented: "When you give a gift, you want it to be nice, to make it clear to the other person that you respect them".[32] As these examples demonstrate, also in the Italian migratory context, ICTs are mediators of social ties, particularly in sexual and friendly relations. Through the creation of debt and credit chains (Mauss 2012; Pype 2016b), they contribute to cementing relationships in a context that tends to be fragmented. Expanding one's social network is essential for the realization of one's own migratory projects, seeing as it is often through word of mouth that people find

29. Omar, 18 July 2017. Regarding the relationship between home and a reflection of oneself, cf. Miller (2009, ch. 2).
30. Mohammed, 2 August 2017.
31. Daniel, 8 August 2017.
32. Moussa, 2 August 2017.

work or a room to rent. In this sense the gift, requesting a counter-gift in exchange, opens a chain of actions and reactions that produces a new future.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that the use of smartphones among young African men living in reception centers in Italy constitutes a "weapon" in the battle for time that characterizes their daily life, allowing for time expansion, more than time compression, as it is generally assumed (Vokes, Pype 2018). I have argued that the dimension of desire and the future, rather than that of nostalgia and the past, is at the heart of the media practices of forced migrants. In this sense, the smartphone is fundamental for obtaining a form of international protection and, once out of the reception centers, for finding a job and a home. It is not simply about surfing the internet to collect useful information (such as job listings), but about skillfully crafting one's own virtual image, through knowledgeable production and circulation of photographs. Immersed in an environment in which one has little control, people at least try to steer what happens to themselves in virtual space. "Facebook is mine, the phone is mine: I'm the manager and I do what I want," Bouba affirmed emphatically.[33]

Precisely with reference to the possibility of "editing our world of experience, what we choose to see and what we choose to keep" (Miller *et al.* 2021: 224), the smartphone has been recently defined as a "transportable home": you are always at home in your own smartphone, write the authors of "The Global Smartphone" (Miller *et al.* 2021: 219). This virtual home is particularly precious for those who do not live in a physical home. The reception center was in fact not felt as "home," even when people lived there for years. Yet it was meaningfully called "camp," bolstering – as in Agamben's definition of camp (1995; 2003) – the hardship of the life experience in a CAS, where existence tends to be reduced to the mere carrying out of organic functions: "At the camp we sleep and eat all day, that's not right,"[34] many complained. In this way the smartphone, the most beloved object, represents a temporary substitute for the dwelling that is lacking and, at the same time, is a useful means for building a "true" new home, interrupting the journey to carry out one's migratory project.

33. Bouba, 5 April 2018.
34. Sekou, 8 September 2017.

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