“Where there is room to fight for your beliefs that is the ideal place”

Imagination and agency of Athenians with migratory background
Abstract

In the globalized world, border regimes are ambiguous, withdrawn or reinforced based on who approaches them, where and how. Borders are equally the boundaries that permeate spaces of nation-states and cut across them through racialized, gendered, and classed divisions. Following the so called “migration crisis” in Europe of 2015, there has been a wave of research documenting how practices of bordering and othering dehumanize asylum seekers, violating their rights. In this thesis, I proceed from similar observations to see how such practices, together with experiences resulting from them, affect the possibilities of agency and imagination of a common space on behalf of people with migratory background. Employing the idea of hybridity, I maintain that while the responsibility for atrocities related to migration and bordering should always remain on violators, whether official institutions or individuals, their persistence should not be seen as foreclosing agency, imagination, or practices of building a future common space on behalf of people with migratory background. The hybrid position that these people occupy does not necessarily only sustain their disempowerment, but it also equips them with unique possibilities for agency. Neither seems there to be any predefined path from exposure to harsh violations of one’s rights to disempowerment. The possibilities for common and welcoming places to which everyone has a right appear through an engaged and equal attention to migrants’ own agency, imagination, and capabilities, rather than through an exclusive attention to their vulnerability or a neoliberal celebration of multiculturalism.

Keywords: migration, city, space, bordering, othering, imagination, hybridity
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1. Introduction

During an afternoon walk with my son in our neighborhood square in Athens, we ran across a young boy playing with his kick bike. My son of a similar age, riding a similar bike, ran directly to him. The two boys started to play almost immediately, happily running around together. The boy’s mother was a few meters away, occupied with her work as a street saleswoman. The thought struck me that children are never preoccupied with divisions that adults place on each other, such as origin or appearance. Through the boys’ encounter I also got the chance to get to know his mother. Soon, my son and I would go to the square every afternoon to meet our new friends. It was a sad moment for all of us when it was time for farewell at the end of the fieldwork period. The boys are still looking forward to another meeting with excitement.

I began writing this text, thinking how a random encounter can become an occasion for the coming together of people who at first might appear quite different. My thesis engages with the phenomenon of migration as it unfolds in different aspects of everyday life. I attempt to approach migration not as an abstract phenomenon but as a concrete experience of living. Most of the scholarship on migration emphasizes its negative aspects, for example the exploitation of migrants, the hardships of mobility itself, the institutional or legislative discrimination that migrants face, or even everyday racism. Instead, I want to explore the possibilities of belonging that are inherent to but often overlooked in the experience of migration. To do this, I focus on two aspects of experience that people with migratory background possess. On the one hand, I document the instances of exclusion, everyday racism and discrimination on behalf of both official institutions and citizens of the place where people with migratory background live. These are well-researched phenomena that have been observed throughout the world and Europe especially, in particular following the so called “migration crisis” of 2015. On the other hand, I approach how people with migratory background themselves relate to the place they find themselves in, how they imagine
its alternatives and potential transformations, and which practices their imagination is connected to.

I opt for the term “people with migratory background”, since my research is not limited to only migrants, even though migrants form a core group of people I am interested in. People born in “hosting” countries, whose parents are migrants, the so-called “second generation” of migrants, also face exclusion and discrimination, although to different extent and sometimes in different forms. People who come from the “hosting countries” and are actively involved in civil society projects aimed at migrants, such as in case of assistance in communication with the authorities, legal advice, help with accommodation and employment, are often subjected to similar hostile behaviors. While the experience of these different people is divergent, it at the same time exists within the frame of migration – one of the key phenomena constituting contemporary societies in the globalized world.

Aim and research questions

More specifically, I study how an inclusive place is constituted in the urban environment by people with migratory background, through their experience of migration and possibilities of imagination. The exact place I focus on is the city of Athens, an urban environment which historically has to a large extent been shaped and (re)constituted by the comings and goings of different groups of people. The aim of my thesis is to elucidate how practices of bordering and othering as well as their transgression relate to people’s capability of imagining a desirable life in a welcoming place in the context of Athens.

Methodologically, my thesis is based on participant observation and deep conversations with people directly experiencing the effects of migration. The three bodies of theoretical literature that I use to approach my material relate, first, to bordering and othering in their connection to citizenship; second, to city-making and understanding of place as a web of relations; and third, to imagination and hybridity.

Two research questions have guided my study:

- How do people with migratory experience in Athens envision their possibilities?
- How do migratory experiences affect this vision?
Structure of the thesis

In what follows, I start with reflections on my research and the methods I used, as well as with a necessary context that allows a more nuanced understanding of my material. I proceed to the detailed outline of the three components that together comprise my theoretical framework, introducing several concepts important for my analysis. In the analytical part that follows, I concentrate on specific topics that grew from my observations and interviews, relating them to the chosen theoretical framework. Finally, in the conclusion I provide a short summary of my findings and attempt to answer my research questions.

2. Method and reflexivity

I decided to conduct my fieldwork in the city of Athens for a variety of reasons. First, it is currently home to a great number of people from around the world and thus a fertile ground where to observe the everyday experience of migration. Second, Athens is my hometown which made it more accessible as a field. I had the advantage of speaking the local language and being familiar with various cityscapes. Further, for a few years in the past I was engaged in the issues of migration and human rights activism. I was part of an advocacy group that focused on migrant rights, providing guidance to migrants in their correspondence with authorities, monitoring incidents of everyday racism and performing other tasks. Later on, becoming a migrant myself after moving to Sweden, I was able to experience these issues - though to a much lesser extent – from the inside. So, my interest in the migration experiences in Athens has developed over time and it is based on professional, personal, and political insights.

When planning my fieldwork, I had thought of two projects through which I could access those experienced with migration issues. Despite what I had considered good planning, after arriving at the field the two projects proved to be of limited use. Through my own experience I learned in practice what I had previously read about, namely that the field never appears the way one planned it. So, I decided to turn to my old activist network and got in touch with another organization called FEMARTACT which stands for Feminism Art Activism. Through this organization I encountered some of my
interlocutors as well as participated in some events, such as a demonstration. The snowball technique also proved useful for coming into touch with acquaintances of my interlocutors and for leading me to new locations and events. I also got in touch with the Greek Forum of Refugees\(^1\) so I could visit their office and have a chance to talk to two members of the board. Further, I visited a festival\(^2\) organized by the Greek Forum of Migrants, a two-day event on the occasion of the International Migrants Day. During the festival I was also able to observe the making of a video for the International Migrants Day, which was a collaboration between the Greek Forum of Migrants and Amnesty International and depicted three persons describing their experience of migration.

My research took place in the midst of the COVID19 pandemic when public life in Greek cities was drastically shrinking due to an unprecedented number of cases and deaths. In this context, to actively engage in continuously decreasing in number public activities would both mean to risk the health of an already vulnerable group of migrants in Athens. Furthermore, it would not bear sufficient benefit for my study, as these activities were strictly regulated and monitored by the authorities. Still, the key method of anthropological research is participant observation (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011), and I have tried to employ it as much as circumstances allowed. At several events that I joined, such as the demonstration, the festival and several exhibitions, I employed participant observation. I have also done this while visiting homes of migrants, when invited for a dinner or an informal gathering. Moreover, I was particularly attentive to the surroundings of my everyday activities: while buying groceries at a street market or commuting in the local transport.

While participant observation undoubtedly was an important method of my inquiry, its application appeared limited also for another reason. The specificity of my inquiry, related to the possibilities of imagination and agency on behalf of people with migratory backgrounds, points to their private matters as much as to the public ones. The phenomena that I was interested in, unfold on a constant basis through the lives of my interlocutors, while my possibility to observe their lives was necessarily limited. For this reason, I complemented participant observation with walking ethnography (Lee &

\(^1\) https://refugees.gr/
\(^2\) https://www.facebook.com/events/1275360759633211/
Ingold (2006) and deep conversations, often held in public places or connected to some of the events that I attended.

Overall, I conducted 10 interviews with a total of 12 individuals, 6 of whom were men and 6 women. I use the term “interview” in a sense that these talks were planned in advance; however, they turned out to be mostly informal conversations and exchange of experiences, rather than actual interviews. Further, I met with the same persons on different occasions. My initial thought was to conduct interviews with migrants and people who work with migrants, but the separation proved not at all clear. Nevertheless, most of my interlocutors had moved to Greece from another country: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Guinea, South Africa, Albania, Nigeria, Senegal, – some were born or grew up in Greece and have migrant background. I did not have clear demarcations of who should count as a person with migrant experience and who should not; this decision was rather intuitive and the most relevant part of it was how my interlocutors view and position themselves. All of the names used are pseudonyms, with one exception of a specific person who wished to be named. As for the locations where the key conversations took place, three interviews were conducted online, two – in the interlocutors’ own homes, two in the home of the founding member of FEMARTACT, one in my own home, one in a café and one in the office of the Greek Forum of Refugees. Following these, I met the same people on different occasions and continued some topics of our conversations.

Further, I conducted multi-sited fieldwork in a sense that I attempted to follow my topic in different sites and locations, which in the words of Ulf Hannerz was not “confined within a single place” (2003: 206), trying to trace the interconnections between different sites and encounters. There are different views on participant observation. Some researchers consider that the goal of ethnography should be no other than the creation of academic knowledge and by extension participant observation should rather liken a detached scientific endeavor. However, others stress the significance of encounters, calling for an active engagement with communities that ethnographers study. Borneman & Hammoudi (2009: 260) call for an approach to fieldwork that involves field encounters as lived experience. In this case, researchers are constantly reflexive “on the practice of research and writing about serious and protracted involvement with human collectives”. In such view, for ethnography to be truly critical, anthropologists
should embrace the vulnerability of being involved in a process of honest dialogue “with the people whose human condition they study” (ibid: 261). Knowledge production thus derives from engagement with the vagueness of social life and its connection to theoretical concepts.

In a similar manner, Coleman & Collins (2006: 12) call for a “commitment to engaging in the performance, and not just observing from the seats”, so as to conduct research that can be truly reflexive and lead to knowledge production. This means that ethnographic research is not only scientific but also practical and political. I opted for such engaged approach to fieldwork since I do not view myself as separate from my chosen field.

Additionally, my research questions indicate a need for sensory ethnography. A key concept of sensory ethnography is emplacement. Emplacement suggests that bodysminds relate to material and sensorial environments and this relation is what constitutes place. In this sense, we are always ‘emplaced’. Thus, an emplaced ethnographer becomes a part of the social entanglement that they wish to study and its power networks. This entanglement is never static but always in flux, demanding the researcher to constantly recalibrate their senses (Pink 2015). In this line I attempted to emplace myself within the experiences, memories, and imaginaries of my interlocutors. One method that I used within the sensory approach was walking ethnography (Lee & Ingold 2006). However, in my case it also involved what could be described as commuting ethnography as in addition to walking the streets of Athens together with some of the people I met, I even followed them on public transport. Lee & Ingold (2006) explain that walking in itself (or commuting together I might add) does not by definition entail embodiment or partaking in experience of others. Rather, it is the sharing of activity, the closeness involved, that is a precondition for the possibility of walking together to turn into an experience of embodiment. Further, understanding with the whole body is very important to social life. The physicality of doing things together offers a deeper kind of proximity and a meaningful way of socializing. For example, when people engage into conversation while walking, they rarely have eye-contact but instead coordinate their movements, which is a deeper form of communication, or they share the same viewpoint (Lee & Ingold 2006), an experience I was able to take a glimpse at during my fieldwork. For instance, I followed one of my interlocutors for a walk around their neighbourhood before we sat down at a café and had our
conversation. The walk proved very fruitful in two ways: I got a better sense of the place through my interlocutor’s point of view and also it got us both in a more relaxed mood and facilitated communication before we started talking.

An important issue for my study has been my own engagement and desire for change, for which reciprocity of research activity is an essential methodological concept. Through reciprocity, ethnographers should strive for research that can prove useful to the ones they learn from. The engaged anthropologist is a central concept for Bejarano et al (2019), who state explicitly that anthropology should and can become “an instrument for advocacy and progressive social change” (p1). Therefore, their approach to method and research design is an “explicitly political” one which “makes common cause with the struggles of those with whom ethnographers work” (ibid: 3-4). Since I am interested in the possibility to construct common social space, I opted for such engaged and reciprocal approach, which is reflected in parts of my analysis. Additionally, making common cause seems to me an obvious choice, considering our common circumstances today, often referred to as the age of precarity. Bejarano et al (2019) give an accurate description when they mention ever-growing inequalities, uncontrolled exploitative capitalism, institutionalized racism and sexism, corruption and violence, climate change and never-ending wars.

Further, anthropology can become an instrument for social change by engaging with “decolonial theory and methodology” (Bejarano et al 2019:3). The authors aim to illustrate that what they describe as coloniality, being a power regime, is inherently contradictory and fragmented, a fact that allows for change. Coloniality in anthropological study is defined as being harmful to the people it aims to understand while at the same time it deprives new anthropologists of the chance to use anthropology as a tool for change. Instead, Bejarano et al (2019) suggest that ethnographers need to contribute to the lifeworlds of others and not just seek to extract knowledge and in such manner invite these others to benefit and even participate actively in the research process. Another important aspect of the decolonial approach is the dismantling of the subject - object dichotomy, which entails a different way of writing to address broader audiences even outside academia. Moreover it requires “humility and solidarity” on behalf of the ethnographer so as to acknowledge their privilege, expose injustice but also participate in opposing it, or in other words to learn
from others instead of learning about them (Bejarano et al 2019: 8). In such manner, engaged anthropology will present the historical others with the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of the knowledge produced and use it as a tool for the advancement of their own political agendas and scholarly enterprises.

Thus, coloniality should not be seen as a condition specific for a certain time or certain space, but rather as an overarching power regime within the globalized postcolonial world. In this way, coloniality is an important issue for any study that focuses on migration. In my study, I have employed the concept of hybridity that comes from postcolonial scholarship and responds to the contradictions of coloniality in order to approach social and political change. Moreover, I specifically focus on the issues of imagination and agency in relation to the concept of hybridity. Through my engagement I made an honest attempt to use my own privileges for the benefit of those I engaged with. Surely, such attempt can only partially succeed, as researchers, including myself in this case, also partake in the colonial power matrix, holding many privileges without awareness of them. In this case, I can only be sure that I reflected on my own position within the fieldwork to the degree available to me at particular moments in particular places, yet no outcome is ever guaranteed.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that relates to my subject of inquiry is rather broad and encompasses several aspects that are rarely seen in the light of each other in a coherent way. Bordering, othering and displacement are most often put forward as instances of exclusion and disempowerment, which they certainly are, but they are seldom approached as possible grounds for positive envisioning. Place-making in urban contexts, when it is connected to migrants or deprived groups, focuses mainly on structures of power and domination. Hybrid experiences and imagination, while used in anthropological research, have a somewhat vague link to each other. For these reasons, it has not been possible to devote a separate section for previous research; instead, the observations most relevant to my study are elucidated by scholars mentioned in the theoretical framework itself.
Following my research aim and questions, I concentrated on three bodies of theoretical literature. They relate, as mentioned earlier, first, to practices of bordering and othering in their connection to citizenship, second, to city-making and the construction of place as a web of relations, and last, to imagination and experience of hybridity. Bordering refers to a plethora of everyday practices that sustain and reproduce the symbolic border through othering, as exemplified in racial, class, gender and other kind of divisions in the fabric of city life, as discussed below. The creation of a common space is often understood as a transgression of such symbolic divisions through acts of solidarity. However, the effects of individual and collective agency play an equally substantial role. Some scholars have looked at imagination as a prerequisite for transgressing symbolic divisions through solidarity while others have emphasized the role of imagination in creating otherness, related to colonial fantasies of control. The capability for imagining the transgression of borders and creation of a common space has been connected to hybridity - a non-discriminatory identity, that connects and contradicts the dominant established ways of belonging and often develops through migratory experience. I will now turn to each of the three selected theoretical bodies in order to provide their more detailed accounts and elucidate some concepts that I will use further in my analysis.

*Borders and citizenship*

In different ways, scholars have described borders as barriers (Andersson 2014, Fassin 2011, De Genova 2002, Malkki 1995). Khosravi (2019: 413) defines borders as “...barriers...built to defend the economic interests of specific units called nation-states, to safeguard the welfare of the members of these nation-states, called citizens”. This is indeed the most obvious way of thinking borders, as lines of separation between nation-states through the institution of citizenship. However, an indispensable part of contemporary society, or even one of its constitutive ingredients, has been migration viewed as infinite motion. According to Papastergiadis (2000) migration is one of the key elements of the modern world, which is in a state of constant flux. This condition affects not only how we perceive space and time but also our perception of identity and of belonging. In this way, identity and belonging are linked to nationality. Khosravi
points to the fact that the nation state and nationality have become so naturalized and uncontested that “citizenship has become the nature of being human” (2010: 122).

Saskia Sassen (2003) examines citizenship, the “most national of institutions” and discovers what she describes as “micro-transformations” that call for a reconceptualization of the relation between the nation state and the notion of citizenship. She focuses on three main points that suggest such transformations: first, that citizenship is affected by its historical and sociospatial context, second that it is an incomplete institution, in the sense that it is adjustable to new interpretations of its meaning and content and, third, that globalization has made clear that citizenship is not a single entity but comprises a multitude of circumstances and practices not necessarily connected to the nation state. In these ways, citizenship is not only the most national of institutions, but it is also incomplete and open to change, which is constantly highlighted by globalization.

The relations between globalization and citizenship are ambiguous. Papastergiadis (2000) identifies a certain paradox: at the same time as movement across national borders is constantly increasing, states are employing new ways to fortify their borders. That is, as globalization reduces the nation-states’ ability to control matters within their borders, they become all the more fierce in defending them from outsiders, the non-citizens. Khosravi (2010) also identifies a contradiction between the concept of universal human rights and the nation state’s control over its territory. In such manner, to cross the border is seen as something perverse, criminal or even immoral, an act that poses a threat to the sovereignty of the state. Further, the author argues that this criminalisation of mobility is used by the state to create a category of non-citizens that are excluded through the pretext of protecting the ones who belong, the citizens. In this way, the social subjects are classified into useful and non-useful ones through divisions of race, gender, and class.

Papastergiadis (2000) reminds us that the creation of nation-states required uniting culturally diverse peoples by imposing a common (national) identity but also controlling movement within specified territories. Migration though, with its processes of crossing national borders and bringing together people of different cultural identities, questions “the foundations of the nation state” and forces societies to reconsider the connection of identity and belonging with nationality (Papastergiadis 2000: 2).
multiple processes of blurring within citizenships, nationalities, and identities, together with the reactionary policies of nation-states, are captured by the concept of hybridity, which refers to identity as encompassing cultural difference (Papastergiadis 2000). According to Papastergiadis (2000:14) “our sense of self in this world is always incomplete”, in the sense that identity and self-perception is not something static but in constant transformation through interaction. I will expand on the concept of hybridity in relation to imagination and agency in the last section of the theoretical framework.

Further, Khosravi (2019) clarifies that borders separate states but also ways of experiencing the world. Currently, scholars examine the ways that state sovereignty is exercised far away from the geographical border lines, a practice called bordering (Johnson et al. 2011). Borders are thus (re)constructed through laws, institutions and technologies but also infrastructures such as refugee camps (Lafazani 2021). Similarly, borders are now viewed as “processes, practices, discourses, symbols, institutions or networks through which power works” (Johnson et al. 2011: 62). Continuing this line of thought researchers have turned attention into how borders are enacted or performed. Borders can be performed by a variety of different actors existing on different levels of analysis, including NGOs, private corporations but even citizens and non-citizens. The performance of borders allows the different actors to make certain claims; for example, citizens can make demands on the state based on their alleged belonging as compared to the outsiders (ibid).

Scholars have even looked at how borders are performed through everyday life acts in the urban environment. An insightful claim is that the border materializes on the bodies of migrants. In this way the object of investigation becomes the way in which the distinctions of race, class and gender are performed through (non)belonging in the city space. Borders permeate everyday life by sustaining and reproducing existing hierarchies, by allowing or obstructing certain bodies to occupy certain spaces and by ensuring discipline through social norms (Lafazani 2021).

*Place as a web of relations*

The existing literature suggests that spatial perception is tightly connected to experience of specific places, but the difference between space and place is somewhat blurry as it
is presented in different ways (Low 2017, Harvey 1989, Hannerz 1980, 1992). In my research, I will not differentiate specifically between space and place, as such analysis is both outside the scope of this paper, and my field of inquiry is limited to several districts of one city. It is indeed important for any deeper analysis to theorize the interrelations between spatiality, spatial perception and the experience of concrete places. However, my focus is rather on the practices of my informants – connected to imagination or otherwise – and so for these reasons I will look at place-making in terms of how is “imbued with cultural meaning” (Hylland Eriksen 2015:383).

Space is not to be viewed as a fixed container but as functional in “constituting, maintaining and challenging social life” (Liggett & Perry 1995:2). Social space, such as a city, consists of encounters, of cooperation as well as of conflict. Liggett & Perry (1995) draw on theorists such as Lefebvre and Foucault to move beyond the traditional separation of space from symbolic meanings and practice, highlighting how their nexus are crucial in the production of social reality. In other words, “making space is viewed as making meaning” (ibid:8). In this way, space is always social as it involves representation, ideology and on a more quotidian level continuous encounters and interactions (Lefebvre 1991). Thus, space or place is never the same: its meaning is different for different people, and even for the same person in different contexts. In relation to the experience of migration, place-making is described as “a project in its own right”, in connection to the construction of identity (Hylland Eriksen 2015: 383). I will develop this point in further details in the part concerning imagination and hybridity.

Considering city-making, Çağlar & Glick Schiller (2018) look at what they call multiscalar relationships among the variety of actors – including migrants – in (re)constructing the environment of the city. Their approach “explores the interrelated processes of displacement, dispossession, accumulation, and emplacement through which urban life is constituted” (ibid:3). The authors reject the notion that society is confined within the nation-state, whose members partake in the same history, norms, and values. This line of thought leads to the division of urban populations between natives and migrants, in which both groups are perceived as homogenous, resulting in overlooking divisions on the base of class, gender, and race. Instead, the authors advocate for an approach that recognizes all city dwellers as equally engaged in city-making practices. By abandoning the idea of the city as a single, territorially defined
unity, available for study in its fullness, one can perceive a more complex and fragmented image. This approach is called multiscalar, as it sheds light on many interconnected relationships of power that together build up the city fabric on different levels and scales. The various sociopolitical practices, embedded in hierarchical networks of power that make up ‘the city’, should also be studied in a global context, of which they are parts and parcels (ibid.)

Nicholas De Genova (2014) approaches the involvement of migrants in constructing the urban space, something he claims is overlooked in both migration as well as urban studies. The study of “the spatial practices of migrants” (2014:3) in the environment of the metropolis allows for a deeper understanding of bordering practices in the supposed center of the nation state (far away from the physical border). Moreover, such approach elucidates how the practices of migrants in the urban context transform migrant struggles into urban struggles. In this way, a tension of scale between the national territory of the state and the metropolitan space where migrant networks interconnect the global and the regional, is identified (ibid.) These developments occur and are regulated and framed by the simultaneous free movement of capital and impediment of human mobility and increased nationalism.

A popular concept among researchers that adopt an engaged approach is right to the city, introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1968. Lefebvre, reflecting the widespread appeal of his era for social justice, described city as a social space that contains numerous different groups in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, function, or expertise, creating together an ‘urban society’ (Lefebvre in Tsavdaroglou et al: 2019). Yet, most of these groups are excluded from partaking in the city. The right to the city thus includes but at the same time transcends social rights, together with the right to difference and the right to information forming the cornerstones of citizen rights (ibid:121). However, Tsavdaroglou et al (2019:121-122) do not view citizen as narrowly defined by legal status of belonging to a nation-state but as someone actively participating to the experience of city life. Thus, urban citizenship entails active participation in creatively constructing the social, cultural, and symbolic city through collective action. As an alternative to citizenship, the term care-tizenship is proposed to refer to acts of solidarity and the creation of bonds through common action. Further, this concept of reciprocal care is connected to the creation of commons, as a process of co-existing and (re)constructing the city as a set of values and relations, a common space.
Building further on the idea of sharing urban space as social justice, Judith Butler suggests an ethical obligation for plural cohabitation in urban space, since cohabitation is something that is not a matter of choice but an inherent trait of the human condition (Butler: 2014). Butler likens equality to differentiation, which means that no group has more right to belonging than any other (ibid.) Yet another inclusive approach to the city is that of Doreen Massey. Massey examines city space as a conjuncture of many different space-time trajectories that co-constitute each other. In this way the space of the city is always occupied and overdetermined, it is “...a register of plurality and possibility...” that allows for “emancipatory politics” (Massey in Pierce 2019:7).

*Imagination and hybridity*

Benedict Anderson (2006) is among the most prominent scholars to look at the connection between imagination and nation. Although Anderson observes that “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value” (2006:3), still many scholars of different disciplinary and political origins have not managed to define it. Even though nationality and nationalism are very recent concepts historically, as they were not widely used until the end of the 19th century, they are valid in a deep emotional level and thus widely uncontested. Anderson (2006) uses the terms nationality – nationalism interchangeably and characterizes them as “cultural artefacts” that were the result of historical processes. One such key historical process for Anderson is the emergence of print capitalism manifested in the medium of newspaper and the artistic form of the novel, since both created a feeling of simultaneity, of a linear and shared time that all conscripts of a nation share. Nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (ibid:6). Although imagined, nation became a naturalized and taken for granted concept that spread from its point of origin in the west to the rest of the world. A nation is imagined insofar as the sense of fellowship and community exists only in the minds of its members and as what separates different communities is actually the way they imagine themselves. In this fashion, the imagined nation is exclusive, it is bordered; a nation could never encompass the whole of humanity. But also, the allure of belonging to the community of the nation is that despite
the internal power inequalities it is perceived “as a deep horizontal comradeship” (ibid:7).

Anderson’s idea on how the notion of nation has spread beyond the west hints at a need for deeper understanding on the actual concept of imagination. Chakrabarty (2008) brings up the national imagination of India to show how the Western-originated idea of nation has been interacting with different local ideas and practices. In his critique, the author makes clear that Anderson’s account of imagined communities rests on the understanding of imagination that separates subject and object, the mind and the external world. Even though Anderson points out that imagination is not “false” he still seems to contradict it with reality. Thus, further reflexivity on the concept of imagination appears necessary. Chakrabarty suggests that to embrace different imaginations one should accept the different ways of seeing.

How we see the other, the stranger, is a key question for Sara Ahmed. Ahmed (2021) proposes that the figure of the stranger is not someone who is not possible to identify but rather that some bodies are identified as strangers, and that in this way otherness is created, imagined. Similarly, citizenship as an imagined belonging requires that a person proclaim their non-otherness by showing willingness to “be assimilated into the national body” (Ahmed 2021:14) So, the figure of the stranger, being an imagined one, is subsequently obscure and vague and in such manner can be applied to different social groups. Thus, otherness is situated in a particular way of seeing, informed by emotions and preconceptions that construct the figure of the dangerous Other, preceding but also shaping subsequent encounters. Ahmed exemplifies this by pointing out that to ask someone where they are from, is rather a statement of their otherness.

In a similar manner, Khosravi (2020) points to how borders are enacted as imagined otherness. He returns to the seemingly neutral question “where are you from?” and points that it functions as a constant reminder of one’s foreignness and can actually be translated into “From which part of your fantasy and imagination do I come?” The realization of one’s position in relation to the border reflects the imagination of the border maker. Through involving imagination, the author tries to get to the roots of bordering through theorizing how borders appear first in the mind. Here, some reflections come to mind. What do people do when they imagine a border? Is an “imagined” border different from a “real” one, does one transform into another, or
should they even be separated? On how we answer these questions depends also the possibility of transgressing the borders, that arguably should start from the imagination, following the same line of thought.

Imagination has been theorized as a practice of everyday life. In this way, imagination is not considered as something separate from the “real” practices but rather as embedded in everyday life. Especially significant in terms of acts of solidarity, place-making and collective action has been the idea of shared imagination (Pink 2015). Appadurai (2013: 287) proposes to see imagination “as a collective practice that played a vital role in the production of locality”. To him, anthropologists have historically connected imagination with liminal moments while they studied small scale societies and their shamanic initiating and prophetic rituals. Such theoretical observations are connected to “quotidian social labour of producing locality” (ibid:287). The author is specifically interested in how the personal archives of memories do not simply stay in the past but allow to negotiate and shape futures, thus making a case of imagination as practice.

Thereby, imagination can both sustain and challenge border regimes through the ways that it produces locality, which is especially vivid in the experiences labelled hybrid ones. Generally, the idea of hybridity - as well as the related to it ideas of creolization, transculturation or bricolage - comes from the historical colonial experience that still underpins the contemporary processes of migration. Hybridity was first theorized in relation to culture and language to characterize the cultural artefacts and utterings that move beyond the fixed cultural and linguistic entities, enabling a particular “contradiction, ambiguity, irony” (Hannerz 2019:150) and allowing “desirable cultural renewal” (ibid:149). Hybridity allows to assess the transition from pain or compassion, characteristic of the colonized condition, to assertiveness and celebration (ibid.) The idea of hybridity was taken up by social scientists in order to point towards a specificity of identity within the globalized postcolonial world, “constructed through a negotiation of difference” and embracing contradiction (Papastergiadis 2000: 170). In this sense a hybrid identity comprises much more than the aggregation of its parts: it is something new that appears through the process of coming together and mutual transformation of allegedly disparate elements (ibid.) As such, hybridity and hybrid identity are tightly connected to the experience of borders and boundaries, which it crosses, twists and transgresses in search for a room for transformation, polysemy and blurring (Hannerz
2019). The position on the margin, not on this side of a particular border and not on that, not only calls for a specifically adaptive strategy of survival, but it also allows for a larger amount of cultural freedom. Thus, a clear connection is made between hybridity and specific possibilities for human agency.

Hybridity has been celebrated for its emancipatory potential, stemming from agency and not connected to fixed national identities (Bauhn & Fulya Tepe 2016). Thus, it can be expected that hybrid identities have the potential for alternative imagination and perception of a common place. In this sense hybridity, due to its synthesis of diverse cultural traits, can challenge authoritarian relations. Moreover, hybridity has the potential for mediation between majority and minority groups. However, hybridity should not be viewed as necessarily leading to agency; it can both amplify and impede agency, depending on the context within which it is experienced by different individuals. Bauhn & Fulya Tepe (2016) make a distinction between imposed or chosen, accepted or rejected hybridity and claim that such seemingly slight differentiation affects a person’s capacity for agency, understood as “the capacity to choose and pursue one’s conception of a worthwhile life” (2016: 354). For example, the capacity for agency of those in a privileged position (intellectuals, businesspeople) who easily move between cultures, often referred to as cosmopolitans, is not the same as that of migrant workers who are forced to navigate in a foreign environment. In the context of migration, hybridity can have both positive and negative effects as it can be experienced as socially and economically beneficial or, on the contrary, as a cause of exclusion and disorientation, or sometimes both. The authors show how in their research hybridity was described as ‘being in-between’ by their informants, and that trait was viewed as a negative or positive one, depending on personal attributes but also social context. In the frame of a multicultural environment of a big city, for migrants to be viewed as hybrids can be the cause of lack of confidence and confusion in interaction with others, while at the same time the demand for adaptability can lead to new creative ways of resisting oppression by the cultural majority. Besides, the urge to migrate originates in a desire to expand one’s capacity for agency (ibid.) Taking this line of thought further, agency can be directly connected to imagination, viewed as “the capacity to think of alternatives”, something central to human existence. (Zittoun & Gillespie 2017:14)
Zittoun & Gillespie (2017) propose that imagination is a process that creates experience since it allows one to transcend the immediate social and material reality. Through the creation of a possible future, it allows to “loop back” and transform the current reality. Imagination is not something abstract, though, but it is always embedded in the social context, as it is allowed or constrained by social norms and related to particular social and cultural practices. At the same time, imagination is an individual as well as an embodied experience: every human being has a unique life path which is constantly enriched and transformed through new experiences. “People...live and feel and perceive the world as a body...and each person is a radically specific source of experience” and ways of imagining (ibid:4). Further, imagination is a process in a sense that it actualizes when informed by previous experiences, by interactions with others, and by social stimuli, constantly reshaped by these. In this sense, it is directly linked to how we create meaning, holding the potential to bring about social change (ibid.).

The connection of imagination to agency and thus its emancipatory potential is particularly effective when approaching the phenomenon of hybridity. If we take as a starting point that imagination is essential in adapting to uncharted territories, spatial and cultural, and that a broad spectrum of cultural material enhances the capability for imagination (ibid), then a claim could be made that hybrid identities are better equipped to envision new possibilities. “Acting on the basis of an imagined future is agency, which occurs at the moment when there is recoupling with the ongoing everyday situation” (ibid:132), and everyday situations of hybrids can be expected to be more nuanced and multisided since they challenge the established ways of seeing, bordering and constructing places. Furthermore, the authors maintain that practicing imagination necessitates both social and symbolic material, and thus presupposes places that allow for debate and contradiction such as an urban environment. On the other hand, when conditions are restraining, which entails a repression of cultural elements as in the case of minorities, the result might be a repression of imagining alternatives. Zittoun & Gillespie (2017) suggest that imagination is freedom since the very act of imagination is an instance of agency, as it allows one to escape – even momentarily so – their constraining conditions and at the same time to navigate through them. Since humans have agency, what they do and who they become is linked to their capability of imagining alternatives. In the exercise of such freedom, memories of previous
experience viewed as “imagination of the past” are frequently a precondition for envisioning future possibilities, guiding choices and practices in the present (ibid.)

4. Background

To approach the experiences and practices of my interlocutors, it is indispensable to elucidate a larger social and political context within which they have been placed. As my readers are likely to be only partially informed about the developments of Greek migratory policies through the latest decades, I will provide a brief overview and discussion of them in this part.

As a society located at the common border of the EU, Greece for the last three decades has been shaped by migration to and from Europe. However, it was only following the wars of the past 20 years in the Middle East, and even more so the war in Syria and the resulting so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 that migration had become a hot topic of Greek and European politics.

There have always been and still are very few legal avenues through which a third country national (non EU-citizen) can enter the country: for studies, after receiving a visa following an employment offer (very complicated process and quite unusual considering the deep economic crisis that Greece has been subjected to for at least a decade), for family reunion – under the condition that one has sufficient means to provide for the family member – and for what is called economic activities, a way available only to wealthy people able to arrange a significant investment. In a vast majority of cases, the only option for people in need to reach Greece and Europe is to apply for asylum. The access to this internationally recognized human right, is becoming increasingly restricted. According to the Amnesty International’s Annual Report 2021/22, “pushbacks and human rights abuses against refugees and migrants at land and sea borders continued, despite systematic denials by the Greek authorities” (Amnesty International 2022: 178). The report describes how members of law

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enforcement, sometimes wearing civilian clothing, performed pushbacks, arbitrary detention and ill-treatment, sometimes even torture. None of the victims were given the opportunity to apply for asylum. The situation is not much better for those succeeding to enter the Greek soil since successive Greek governments add their bits to make the access to asylum next to impossible. Reception conditions are equally bad with open camps being replaced with prison-like facilities, where exiting is excessively restricted and chances to apply for asylum and thus gain a quasi-legal status even temporarily are slim. Unaccompanied minors’ rights are also violated, since there is lack of appropriate accommodation, inadequate protection from harm and lack of access to education and healthcare.

Even migrants that reside in the country for many years face constant bureaucratic obstacles when trying to renew their residence permits or obtain citizenship. Delays in renewing residence permits are common, and the Ministry of Migration prefers to issue extensions instead. However, the extensions are not recognized by other authorities and public services in the country, which treat their holders as having no right of residence. In order to apply for citizenship one needs to hold a residence permit for at least 7 years, show steady income and present several other documents, including a passport from the country of origin. The fee for the application is 700 euros. The applicant also needs to pass an examination in the Greek language, history, geography, and culture in order to be able to apply. Worth mentioning is that the Greek state does not offer language courses to migrants and this need is covered solely by NGOs. The application process is almost as complicated for people born and raised in the country which happen to have parents of different origin.

Discrimination against migrants and refugees appears persistent, with the Amnesty International report mentioning 107 incidents of racist violence as reported by the Racist Violence Recording Network for 2020 and even “hate crimes by members of

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* [https://www.migrant.gr/cgi-bin/pages/index.pl?arlang=English&argenkat=%CE%95%CE%A1%CE%93%CE%91%20%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%95%CE%99%CE%A3%20-%20%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%91%20%CE%94%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%99%CE%A9%CE%9C%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%91&arcod=201019135732&type=article](https://www.migrant.gr/cgi-bin/pages/index.pl?arlang=English&argenkat=%CE%95%CE%A1%CE%93%CE%91%20%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%95%CE%99%CE%A3%20-%20%CE%99%CE%A3%CE%91%20%CE%94%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%99%CE%A9%CE%9C%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%91&arcod=201019135732&type=article)

7 [https://www.ypes.gr/UserFiles/ff0f9297-f516-40ff-a70e-ec84e2eb999/Odhgies-ithageneias.pdf](https://www.ypes.gr/UserFiles/ff0f9297-f516-40ff-a70e-ec84e2eb999/Odhgies-ithageneias.pdf)

far-right groups and other individuals against migrants” (Amnesty International 2022: 180).

According to the Amnesty International’s annual report from 2013, a decade ago the asylum process was still under police jurisdiction and the Alien’s Police Directorate in Athens would register only about 20 applications per week. “Asylum seekers and irregular migrants, including unaccompanied children were routinely detained and for long periods” in “inhuman and degrading” conditions (Amnesty International 2013: 108). Regarding discrimination the report recounts “racially motivated attacks escalat[ing] dramatically” (ibid:108). Migrants and refugees were faced with physical violence (even murders) and saw their homes and shops being attacked by organized groups and the same applied for many unofficial mosques (ibid.) The first and only official mosque in Athens started operating as late as November 2020⁹, even though freedom of religion is stated in the constitution since the founding of the modern Greek state, 200 years ago. Some of my interlocutors spoke of this period as the time of Samaras, referring to the name of the then prime minister, famous for his anti-migrant policies and rhetoric. In a public speech in May 2012 he claimed that “the illegals [migrants] need to be removed from this place since they have become the tyrants of our society”¹⁰. A look through Amnesty International’s annual reports is useful in following the societal context though the years, showing how the harsh conditions, to which my interlocutors have been exposed, remain mostly unchanged.

5. Thematic analysis

In this section I will provide an analysis of the main themes that I identified through discussing with my interlocutors as well as through participant observation. To clarify, the distinction presented below is made for analytical purpose, and it consists of four core themes. The themes are: first, discriminatory practices on behalf of the institutions, second, othering in everyday encounters, third, belonging, and last, imagination and practice. In all my observations and all my conversations, these themes never appeared in such distinct manner, rather they always came in combined and interconnected

⁹ https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-greece-religion-mosque-idUKKB27M2HU
¹⁰ https://www.megatv.com/2012/05/03/ant-samaras-apo-to-zappeio/
fashion, and the flow of a single conversation could mingle between different themes several times. The analytical distinction is necessary to put my material in a productive synergy with the theoretical framework, however, all the described topics and quotes formed lively and messy narratives rather than a clear-cut academic division. I nevertheless will try to make connections between different themes and highlight the crucial points of their intersection, in an attempt to make my analysis and material to better resemble the actuality of anthropological field research. I will also make connections to several concepts of my theoretical framework and elaborate in greater detail when so is necessary for providing sufficiently nuanced answers to my research questions.

*Discriminatory practices on behalf of institutions*

Even though the word “border” was barely ever used in my field, almost all people that I encountered described incidents of discrimination, of othering and exclusion. Discrimination was described a lot mostly in relation to state institutions. In their contacts with the authorities, all my interlocutors had to experience the border being performed and reproduced through the practices of state institutions. One main issue recurrent in the narration was the difficulties with obtaining and maintaining legal papers. It was an issue causing extreme stress and bitter memories.

Orpheus is an artist who came to Greece from Sub-Saharan Africa as a minor approximately ten years ago. He described how he was arrested shortly after his arrival because of lacking legal status and then detained for a total of 17 months even though he was a minor, only 15 years old when he arrived. Shortly after arriving to Greece, Orpheus managed through word of mouth to find a job at a fish market in a small town outside of Athens, about two hours away by car. But on his very first day, while going to work, he was apprehended by a group of policemen and taken to detention for not having legal documents. He describes the incident of his apprehension: “They came with the guns...as if they were going to kill someone...I don’t know...it was too many police...” During the time he was detained, he was impeded from applying for asylum while instead he recounted how the officers would repeatedly visit and try to convince him to sign a document for a voluntary return to his country of origin. He was told that
he would receive the amount of 400 euros for this from a voluntary return program funded by the International Organization for Migration. He repeatedly refused since, as he explained, arriving to Greece had cost him 5000 euros instead. “I was like…I don’t want to go, I prefer to die here!” He also explained that the conditions in the detention center were a “push” factor to accept a voluntary return since the food was barely eatable, sanitary conditions were very poor and the cells were extremely overcrowded. He managed to make an asylum application as a minor a whole year after his arrest and was then moved to another facility.

The story of Orpheus’ interaction with the Greek authorities exemplifies the ambiguity of borders in relation to the contested institution of citizenship, in which border regimes function selectively to the benefit of particular groups. Sassen (2003, 2006) shows how citizenship is challenged and shaped by globalization, and the case of Orpheus refers to this process in two important ways. First, the fact that he managed to find a job in Greece without obtaining legal status suggests that borders can be withdrawn or overlooked in case there is economic benefit involved for those who capitalize on exploited and deprived of civil rights labour. Crucially, the ambiguity of the border is rather a necessary condition for such arrangement than its consequence: the deprivation of rights is based on precisely the possibility to be deported, on border suddenly appearing where it seemed not to exist.

Second, in his distress about the interaction with the Greek authorities, Orpheus seems to counteract the damaging effects of (non)citizenship with his rights as a human being. Sassen (2003) highlights how the development and increasing significance of human rights contested the monopoly of the state on granting rights. However, this is not unproblematic since in order for human rights to be enjoyed it is necessary for the state to enforce them. This blending of international - national regime unfolds “as a partial denationalizing of some of the functions and work of state institutions” (ibid:17). Through this, the dichotomy of subject – non-subject that the nation state is built upon is becoming blurred (ibid.) The author uses different examples where the concept of illegality is contested: when undocumented migrants are given a partially legal status though recognition in national and international courts and through the acts of citizenship, or when they have demanded rights informed by their sense of belonging in the community. Thus, the figure of the citizen as subject becomes blurred and the institution of citizenship is open for transformation. Still, the possibility for
transformation entails ambiguity since it can lead to increased rights but also to their abuse, as happened in the case of Orpheus.

Even those who managed to avoid detention had to go through the ordeal of obtaining what was called the ‘red card’, a card used as an id-card for asylum seekers. Alex came from Afghanistan to escape violence about 15 years ago as a young adult. It is very hard to apply for asylum now, as Alex explains, but before it was totally brutal. The queue at Petrou Ralli was how he obtained his red card in 2008. I was quite familiar with this queue, as I had witnessed it myself on several occasions. Following the idea that borders exist at the heart of a nation-state as well as at its “physical” margins, constructed by people’s actions and imaginaries, that queue was a clear manifestation of the border within the very center of Athens. Until a few years ago asylum process was under the jurisdiction of the Hellenic Police and more specifically what was called The Alien Directorate, which was placed in the police building on Petrou Ralli street, one of the central streets of the city but of course not in the tourist zone. The only avenue available to file an application for asylum and thus obtain a quasi-legal status was to queue outside the back side of the police building, where applications were accepted once a week, very early on Saturday mornings.

People would start queueing already on Thursday evening. Only approximately 20 individuals were accepted every week, so one’s place in the queue was of utmost importance, if someone would leave the queue even for “going to the bathroom” behind some parked car they would lose their spot. In Alex’s words: “The situation was brutal…The police were treating us worse than animals. If someone would fall asleep after waiting in the queue for two days, they would come and throw dirty water at us or use the megaphones on the police cars to play sounds of goats or pigs just to mock us”. Alex hinted that the police had even murdered people in this queue, but he did not want to go more into it. Still, the same person claimed with certainty that he would never want to live somewhere else. He explained that he moved to Germany for almost 2 years but decided to come back as he would not change Athens for anywhere else, a seeming paradox to which I will return in the later parts of my analysis.

Maria came to Greece 21 years ago as a 19-year-old following her husband. Today she lives in a neighborhood in the city-center with her 13-year-old daughter. Similarly, Maria described the ordeal that is the process of renewing her residence permit.
office for applications was situated in Omonoia. The family had to go there already in
the afternoon of the previous day in order to queue outside. The next day at 8 in the
morning they would open the door and give out numbers.

As if we were animals...and even worse this kind of behaviour...And when we entered, they
pushed us here and there. They didn’t care if you were a woman, or pregnant or had a small
child...they didn’t care at all. Then they put us to wait in a basement around 100 people
together. There was nowhere to sit down and it smelled like mould. And finally when it was
your turn after all this exhaustion and stress the people working there treated us as if we were
stealing the permit...to have paid for everything to have all the papers in order, to work legally
...I mean why would the clerk care? Since we abide by the law. And the fee is 400 euro per
family member. It is so hard to gather all the necessary documentation. You cannot imagine! I
mean when you think that the day to renew the permit approaches...you cannot imagine. The
hardship! It is so stressful this thing.

The fact that both Alex and Maria make comparisons of how they were treated to the
handling of animals should not be viewed only as a metaphor, as it echoes Khosravi’s
(2010) claim that citizenship became the only way to be regarded a human being. In
this way, those deprived of citizenship in a particular nation-state such as Greece, are
also deprived of their humanity. Their stories also exemplify how such deprivation is
directly connected to bodily experiences and how the border, constructed at the site for
asylum applications, goes directly through the bodies of those wishing to apply, as
suggested by Lafazani (2021). This again happens physically and not metaphorically:
to be considered in or out, one has to place one’s body on a particular spot at a particular
time, and such bodily functions as the need to use the bathroom are appropriated by
nation-state representatives as disciplining mechanisms that sustain the constructed
border.

Even in cases of people born and raised in Greece, having a migrant background means
that they face similar legality issues. Martin described that when he became an adult,
he realized that he was officially considered a migrant since he was asked by the
authorities to provide a document showing how he entered the country and that he was
faced with the risk of being deported from the only country he had ever lived in and
known as home. He jokingly recalled regarding providing a document of how he entered the country: “I told them what kind of document should I bring you? My birth
certificate from the hospital?” Martin’s experience relates to what Sassen (2003, 2006)
calls a subject occupying a grey zone, which is not limited to undocumented migrants
but also includes citizens not fully recognized through discriminative practices. The challenges that are put on the institution of citizenship and that shake its seemingly stable divisions produce not only the distance between citizens and non-citizens, but also the distance between citizens and states to which they supposedly belong. In this way, citizenship requires not only a legal status but also a performance of being a citizen, as suggested by Salter (2008).

A story of another informant highlights how legality and proper identification documents do not entail that one avoids discrimination. Mr. Yonous Muhammadi, former president and founding member of the Greek Forum of Refugees, himself a refugee from Afghanistan who came to Athens in 2001, narrated how he was detained at the airport upon his return on a domestic flight from a trip within the framework of his campaign as a candidate for the European Parliament. He recounted that the guard thought his face reminded of a suspect smuggler. Until his identification was confirmed he had to spend several hours in detention and was released with a simple apology on behalf of the guard. I am having a hard time imagining the scandal if such incident were to happen to any other candidate of Greek descend. However, he himself seemed not to take offense, responding instead to the incident with a humorous mood. He told me that he responded to the half-hearted apology by saying: “I’ll forgive you if you vote for me” and offered the officer his business card. On a different note, though, he narrated how, few years prior to the described event, when attempting to report suffering a racist violent attack to the police, where he was injured as a result, the officer dismissed him and did not make an official report. He explained how the injustice he experienced through the behaviour of the policeman was something hurtful.

The passing of borders not of irregular migrants or asylum seekers but “normal” travellers exemplifies how state policy is structured around creating anxiety, with examination during border crossing producing a disciplinary effect on the state population (Salter 2008). The border symbolizes the contrast between belonging and thus enjoying the protection of the law, and non-belonging and thus being exposed to the dangers of international anarchy. All travellers when being examined during the process of crossing a border “perform both our citizenship and the state’s sovereignty” (ibid:370). During this process, mobility, which is a “natural right”, is turned into something divergent and devious while “state sovereignty”, which is an invention, is naturalized (ibid:373). In this manner, mobility challenges the supposed correlation
between “security – territory – population” that constitute the basis of state sovereignty (ibid), and Mr. Muhamadi could be seen as a threat to the bordered integrity of the nation-state.

The different experiences of othering on behalf of the state institutions and officials, that my interlocutors described, provide a wide range of bordering practices put in occasional service of the nation-state and its beneficiaries. Together, they form an important, and in many cases the most significant, part of their encounters with Greek society. However, as borders are performed not only through interactions with the state institutions but also in everyday life, it is necessary to shed light on this second half as well before proceeding to the analysis of hybrid agency and imagination of the common place.

*Othering in everyday encounters*

Othering in everyday life takes place in many different settings and relations. Most cases when people described incidents of othering in everyday life were occasions of random encounters. My focus does not lie on the actual occurrence of these incidents but rather on how they were experienced and narrated from the point of view of my interlocutors. The graveness of the incidents varied from hinting that a different origin means limited capabilities to verbal insults, and even physical violence. When my interlocutors shared such kind of incidents, they appeared more emotional than when talking about more fixed relations such as accommodation or employment. Racism was a word that was mentioned quite often in their narratives, without me mentioning it or inquiring about it. Maria put it like this:

Not all Greeks are good. How can I have an opinion of someone, that I don’t even know, who has done nothing to me, and just because someone somewhere has committed murder or somewhere someone has stolen, I or my child should go through all this racism? Look, a racist needs no reason...they have it in them...there is no because...But I have cried many times, you can’t imagine how many times I’ve cried about this issue, racism everywhere, everywhere, at school, on the street, but I don’t mind anymore at all. Since age and life at some point change you and you think about things differently...
Orpheus described an incident where a woman threw water at him with a watering hose when she realized he was sleeping next to the entrance of the building across the street. He said the first time she saw him there without knowing that he was homeless she tried to chat with him and asked if he would like an apple, he replied “yes, thank you” so he would be polite, after which she threw an apple from her balcony that fell on the street and broke. He said that he would never eat that apple but took it to be polite. The following day when she saw him again, she tried to know more about him and offered some chocolate that she again threw from the balcony. However, he later understood that she was watching him all the time without him knowing and once when he was sleeping in a little hollow spot next to the entrance of the building across from hers, she threw water at him with a hose and screamed that he should leave and that he was a thief. The police were involved eventually but in the end he could not find any justice since he was only told to leave the place (although his sleeping spot was not actually on someone’s property). He attributed this behaviour to him being black and homeless - the ultimate stereotype of the threatening other. He even described that he had been chased by a group of men on motorbikes holding sticks and randomly attacking people entering and exiting the metro station at Attiki – an area with a significant number of migrant residents.

Christopher arrived in Athens as a political refugee from Iran in 2008 but is currently living in Sweden. He narrated an incident that had such an emotional effect on him that made him want to leave Athens, the city that he has described as his place. One day, while on his way to deliver some documents within the framework of his job, he was run over by a motorcycle that drove out behind a bus while Christopher was walking on the pedestrian crossing. The driver of the motorcycle was speeding, and Christopher was thrown on the air and landed many meters away. Soon after a small crowd gathered, the police were called. “Some people started cursing at me: Fuck off back to your country! I mean I was lying on the ground hurt and then someone asked if I needed help only for another person to reply just leave him, they don’t get hurt that easily, if they can manage to come all the way here walking!” When a policeman arrived the driver of the motorcycle lied and said that he was not speeding or driving out from behind a bus at the bus stop. On the contrary, he claimed that Christopher was never on the pedestrian crossing but had jumped out on the street in front of the motorcycle on purpose. When the policeman was taking Christopher’s statement a woman from the
small crowd started yelling, taking the driver’s side, describing how the poor young man was driving carefully and slowly while the foreigner jumped out right in front of him. The policeman took also that woman’s statement and then presented Christopher with a document that he was asked to sign. By then Christopher called some friends from a civil rights organization who advised him not to sign any document at that moment and wait for their assistance. When he refused to sign, the policeman tried to force him to do it and when he again refused, he was handcuffed and pushed in the police car. His adventure had a fortunate ending when a friend arrived just in time before he was driven away to a police station. Christopher explained that he was very shocked by this incident because it was the first time that he had experienced racism firsthand. Until then he lived in what he described as a protected environment since everyone he interacted with were “normal people”, his friends, his colleagues, his neighbors. So, it was the first time that he actually experienced othering. He could not accept the fact that people would lie about such a serious incident just because he was a foreigner. To him the logical thing would be for everyone to be upset at this reckless driver that could have killed someone, even a child since there was a school just across the street.

At that moment, I realized that I was not anymore someone that had a good job and lived in a nice neighborhood, I was just a xenos… I had tried hard to be a good citizen… but at that moment I felt that everything I had done counted for nothing. The only thing that counted was my skin colour.

Most people I met had similar stories to tell. Maria recounted an incident on the metro where during a minor disagreement with another passenger she received the comment “what can you expect from Albanians”. A similar incident took place on the bus where Alex described how a woman started complaining that all the foreigners smell bad and that they have taken over the country and show no respect (there was no seat available on the bus). To this he reacted by offering the woman his seat and urged her to behave more like a human being in the future. Aphrodite, who had come to Greece in 1997, at the age of 11, from Albania but is in appearance and mode of being indistinguishable from any other Greek woman, narrated how during an evening out with friends a girl who was a friend of a friend was almost shocked when her origin came up. That person commented that this was something that she should had mentioned from the very beginning, so that the company be more aware in case they expressed some opinion
concerning Albanians. In Aphrodite’s own words “I was obliged to inform about my origin the same way you are obliged to inform about an illness; so as not to expose others”. Later, the same girl posed the question that in the case of Albania and Greece going to war, which country would she show support for? In these incidents that my interlocutors narrated, othering was constructed through evoking racial and ethnic stereotypes. In the absence of formal or legal power, citizenship is performed, and borders are constructed through the tools available for citizens occupying a position of the national sovereign, which include racial, ethnic and gender discrimination. Notably, many of such examples are again connected to bodies in physical and not metaphorical way: to their placement on particular spots or to the claimed sensuous experience (such as alleged bad smell) coming from a body of the Other (Lafazani 2021).

Employment and accommodation are also instances of othering and exclusion in the everyday experiences of my interlocutors. These occasions appear different since they include relations that are of a different kind than random encounters, as they are more stable and recurrent. They also include exchange of some kind, such as issues of ownership and payment. Regarding search for accommodation, some found it rather problematic while others considered it unimportant. Martin mentioned that on more than one occasions while looking for a flat, calling numbers on the ads, he had friendly chats on the phone with the owners, – his first name is very common in Greece – but when he arrived for the arranged appointment to see the flat people would not answer the door when they saw his face. A general observation regarding accommodation was that from all the people I talked to, the ones that faced problems with accommodation were the ones that were more foreign in appearance. Regarding employment, the examples of my interlocutors include various incidents ranging from refusing to employ people of different skin color to questioning someone’s professional capacity because of their ethnic origin.

The problem of othering in case of accommodation was attempted to be solved by local activists who arranged places for cohabitation for those in need with migratory background. However, even such “open-door” attempts could transgress the already constructed within the society borders only partially. In her review of a housing project for refugees through the squatting of an abandoned hotel in the city of Athens, Lafazani (2018) comes back to the issue of borders through their enactment in the concrete experience of cohabitation. The author offers an insight at the complexity and
contradictions of an endeavor aiming to abolish borders through concrete action. Even though the squatting aimed to offer housing to migrants and refugees without prerequisites for any kind of legal status, the entrance of the building was still “a stiff border” (Laflâzani 2018:897). That is, demand for housing super-exceeded the number of people the building could accommodate, and inevitably a great number of individuals were necessarily excluded. Thus, the author hints that within the current frame of the nation state, even those attempting to transgress borders through acts of solidarity are still forced to enact them (ibid).

Bordering practices and experiences connected to them, both in the interactions with nation-state representatives and in the quotidian, shape and are shaped by the possibilities of belonging on behalf of my interlocutors. In the next part of my analysis, I turn to how they understand and perceive their belonging to various places and communities in Athens, as well as to the city more generally.

Belonging

Borders are reproduced in various ways both on the institutional level as well as in the quotidian. The stories of the people I encountered sometimes made me wonder how someone can claim a place as their own after being rejected in such cruel manners. Alex narrated that in 2016, he decided to move to Germany. His decision was influenced by the fact that he was facing a medical issue that he could not get adequate help with in Greece, but also the end of his relationship with his then partner. The latter was yet another claim made by most of the people I met – mostly implicitly but at times also explicitly – that place is the relations we form. Alex stayed in Germany for about two years and during his stay he got the medical assistance he needed and even could work. Something that made an impression on him were quick responses on behalf of the authorities when it came to discrimination. He told me that in Germany they have laws against discrimination, recounting a couple of incidents when he turned to the police to report such incidents and that he received support. Despite all the above after a couple of years he decided to move back to Athens. I could not get him to explain exactly what it was that made him return. He described it vaguely, mostly in terms of sociality. “What
should I do in Germany? Spend the rest of my life drinking beer and eating sausages? I wouldn’t change this place for anything”, he commented.

The story of Alex clearly points to the understanding of place as a web of relations, as he connects specific places to people he encounters and activities he does, as well as to sensuous experience (Zittoun & Gillespie 2017, Pink 2015). Such understanding of place is related to the construction of a common space and the transgression of borders. When engaging in the perceptions of the city they live in, people mostly focused on interpersonal relations instead of exact locations, as in the case of Alex, in this case manifesting their belonging. The problem of transgressing borders relates to the issue of Athens becoming a common place to which everyone has a right.

The demonstration
One of the clearest manifestations of belonging on behalf of migrants I have witnessed at a demonstration on Syntagma Square, or the Square of the Constitution - a place in the center of Athens just in front of the Parliament that is a well-known spot for political demonstrations. I had participated in a few in the past, demonstrating for the migrant and refugee rights or for the specific cases of exact people who were detained or exploited on the basis of their non-citizen recognition. The demonstrations on Syntagma Square were sometimes violent and sometimes peaceful, varying very much on the general political context and the limits that the Greek police officers sensed as appropriate at the very exact moment when a particular demonstration had taken place, on the mix of the crowd and on the cases they defended.

A small demonstration that I joined just outside of the Parliament, during my fieldwork, was organized by FEMARTACT, a social cooperative enterprise for the inclusion of vulnerable groups through a feminist and artistic perspective, aspiring to “bring together women so different, yet so similar”, as it is indicated on their webpage11, a claim that I could actually confirm observing the company that gathered for the event. The event was meant to initiate a European campaign trying to shed light to the extra vulnerability of women and LGBTQI persons in the asylum process called Feminist

11 http://femartact.gr/
Asylum\textsuperscript{12}, and was not connected to any specific political issue such as the passing of a new law or a case of a specific person that was brought up by the media.

A founding member of the social cooperative is a friend, a woman who is well-known in activist circles and has a long experience in organizing events like the one that day but also in handling personal help for the cases of private individuals. Present for the event were other members of the cooperative, including migrant women of different origin, and they were few, which was not surprising given the harsh measures against COVID19 and the fact that it was a very cold evening. Although, gradually more and more people arrived, ending with about a dozen of us standing in front of the Parliament. We unfolded a banner depicting a woman refugee carrying a small child, and saying “For the effective recognition of grounds for asylum specific to women, girls and LGBTQI persons”. Within a couple of minutes, a group of policemen arrived, asking what we were doing and who we were. Their presence brought up memories of variating behaviour of the Greek police towards demonstrators, that at times would turn into direct violence. The others around me were silent; I sensed a shared feeling of not knowing what to do in this situation. However, my friend took over, explaining that she would handle the police. She spoke to them in a polite and friendly manner, explaining the cause for the event to them, they answered that they were good with it, but nevertheless decided to stand aside and guard us. The situation could be described in terms of a dissonance, a certain incoherence: we were in a public place, on a spot in the city that everyone is supposed to have a right to, and yet a silent but watchful guard always had an eye on us, as if guarding their backyard. I observed that other women, except my friend who was the organizer of this demonstration, were mostly indifferent yet uncomfortable, probably caring for their own safety – a thought that I also had in the back of my mind. Suddenly, a policeman took a chance to get some pictures of us with his mobile phone, saying “I hope you don’t mind; we are on your side, we like you”. Everyone ignored him, yet this kind of attention was a clear mechanism of control.

After a while, another group joined our demonstration. These people were not invited directly by my friend, but they saw an announcement on Facebook and came to join on their own. Most of them were migrants of Afghan origin, and they came with their

\textsuperscript{12} https://feministasylum.org/
families including young children. By my own activist experience, I had no doubt that at least some of them should have had no legal status, living in Athens in a very precarious position. And yet, they behaved freely but politely, not restricted in their movement around the square, speaking in their own language and not bothering whether they might appear out of place to an outsider (in this case Greek passers-by). One young woman, who appeared to have a leading role in the group, was dressed in a traditional Afghani outfit - a trend among Afghan women to mark their opposition to the Taliban rule and subsequent regression of women’s rights in the country. The colorful young woman was a living defiance to the stereotypes wanting Muslim women to be weak and compliant. One could claim that it was indeed courageous of these people to come stand with us, defying the subtle threat by the police while not having an experienced person who can easily handle the possible issues and sense the context. An interpretation could be that their actions were informed by a sense of belonging to the community (Sassen 2003, 2006). Soon, they clearly took over the initiative: they indicated a place to which we would relocate all together, appropriated the loudspeaker brought by my friend to make loud statements in Afghani, started playing their music and allowed the children to enjoy the place freely.

![Demonstration at Syntagma square. Source: https://femartact.gr/?p=859](https://femartact.gr/?p=859)

There was something metaphorical of this happening exactly on the Square of the Constitution; I thought of the image printed on the first page of the Greek passport: Pericles giving a speech to the democratic citizens of Athens. I understood that I
witnessed a very clear demonstration of appropriation of public space, of what Sassen (2003, 2006) described as acts of citizenship, an open demand for the rights that are neglected or discouraged, or even how migrant struggles transform into urban struggles (De Genova 2015). I wondered whether an appropriation of the public space could have occurred even earlier, at the beginning of the gathering, where the presence of the police was a reminder of the invisible border. However, it appeared that the final outcome was an aggregation of different elements: a combination of my friend’s diplomatic skills, the women’s at times subtle but still clear desire to stand up, and the coming together of a seemingly incongruous group that could overcome a feeling of disempowerment permeating their lives. In such manner, several forces met and recognized each other, giving public space its literal meaning: somewhere were all bodies have the right to be. But even an additional one: a place of free expression and diversity, not limited by any national, ethnic or gender categorizations. There appeared the prospect, even if a slight one, for the creation of the place for all to belong: through a loudspeaker, with cheerful music and children playing around, who do not sense the borders symbolically put in the very air of the Syntagma Square, even the very clear one that delimits the Parliament from the people. It was an occasion of city-making that unfolded on different scales – a one labelled multiscalar, a one happening at the intersection of trajectories of different identities and social positions – that directly responded to the Butler’s (2014) obligation of cohabitation through a claim to the Lefebvre’s (1996/1968) right to the city.

The festival
During one weekend in December, on the occasion of the International Migrants Day, I participated in a two-days multicultural festival that was organized by the Greek Forum of Migrants, a network of migrant communities that advocates for equal rights for migrants and the promotion of integration and social cohesion for an inclusive society13. The idea of the festival, as described on the Facebook page of the event, was to celebrate together in a big fest where visitors would get the chance to experience smells, sounds, images and traditions from many different countries. Festivals like this have been common in Athens and used to attract large crowds of visitors, and sometimes they even sold tickets because the number of those interested was larger than

13 https://www.migrant.gr/cgi-bin/pages/index.pl?arlang=English&type=index
what a particular venue could accommodate. I have many memories of such events, that hosted lectures and debates together with food, handicraft markets and concerts.

This festival took place in the municipal market of Kipseli\textsuperscript{14}, a venue that used to host an old market that was neglected for many years. Now it is run by a Social Cooperative Enterprise, was recently renovated, and appears as a long and full of light indoors rectangular space with shops around it. It hosts many different kinds of events. In a way, it resembles a square in some town, where the most of public life should take place, with a key difference that it is surrounded by walls which clearly indicate its limits. Generally, Kipseli is an area in the heart of Athens that for long has been home for many migrants and migrant communities.

I visited the festival with my family, my husband and son. Through our time there, the number of visitors was rather few, and most of them were members of migrant communities themselves as well as locals from alternative circles – those whom one would expect to engage with the topic of migration and human rights. I met some old and new friends, including old colleagues from a housing project for asylum seekers. My old colleagues told me they were currently unemployed since almost all housing projects for refugees had ended and that the situation had drastically worsened since 2016 when we worked together. For this reason, some people opted to return to Syria, since they preferred to die there than here, as my friend put it. Another acquaintance I came across was the president of the Greek Forum of Migrants, whom I had met as one of the project managers at my old job. He expressed a little regret with the small number of visitors. It made me think of someone who invites friends for dinner and is worried whether they enjoy his cooking. I replied that the festival took place during COVID19 pandemic, and that surely more people would attend later in the evening for the dance and music performances, to which he agreed a bit reluctantly.

The festival was full of cultural activities. These included cooking and food market, workshops and stands where the representatives of the communities sold traditional artifacts, dancing performances and lessons. It was very enjoyable to be at the festival and taste different foods and try different arts, it brought back happy memories from past events. I observed that my son was easily immersed in these activities as well. He

\footnote{\url{https://agorakypselis.gr/}}
was particularly interested in a workshop of folk Ukrainian painting, where he painted a colorful bird that today decorates our Stockholm apartment.

Soon after we entered the venue, an Albanian lady offered us a raki (traditional strong drink in shots), which we eagerly accepted. At that moment, I felt that I was a guest visiting a house of someone else: it is a common thing to offer a drink to someone who visits you. I observed the same attitude when we had Egyptian homemade falafel that my old friend and colleague had prepared, and the smile on her face when I sincerely commented that it was the best I ever tasted. This clearly reminded me of the behaviour of a careful host, and I thought that within the walls of the Kipseli market the roles got reversed. Outside, it is the migrants who are supposed to be, in the best case, guests. Inside the guests were us. However, this reversal happened not through a power pressure – no official document or economic structure or gendered division indicated who is the guest and who is the host – but rather through cultural engagement and sensuous proximity that were extremely pleasant. It was not any legal paper that made me a guest; it was a mixture of tastes, smells, sounds and colors in which I myself eagerly appeared as guest, in a way that felt completely natural. I still was Greek but being Greek at the festival meant something else than making connections to historical or nationalist narratives; it meant that I am different on a par with others, and in this particular place I am celebrated with an open heart.

![Figure 2: At the festival. Photo by the author](image)
At the same time, it was clear that Kipseli market is not a town center of some common place of difference and freedom. Since this was a time-limited event, it was also approached as an occasion for fundraising by the migrant communities. In this way, the common context could never be neglected: sometimes, the proximity and commonality instead reminded of a seller-customer relationship, where the participants rather approached the event as a task that had to be carried out. There was also an occasion of interviews with a few migrants that were to be compiled into a video celebrating the International Migrants Day. During the interviews, the power relationship was obvious to me: the Greeks shooting the video steered the conversation through posing questions and showing an actively welcoming attitude, that produced an image of multiculturalism, in which the migrants are a welcomed part. I wondered what would be the result if the power dynamics were reversed, what would the migrants themselves say or ask a shooting crew? In my private conversations, people rather talked about their hardships and suffering, how every achievement was the result of great effort, than replicated the picture promoted in these interviews. At the same time, the video in its edited form mostly mentions migration as a forced decision rather than a product of personal agency. In combination with the observations on the spot, the edited form of the video seemed to carry a somewhat imperceptible hint that one has to excuse oneself for being a migrant and try to publicly present a brighter picture of one’s own experience\textsuperscript{12}. In this way, Khosravi’s (2010) performativity of borders, related to citizenship as a measure of being human, appears once again, even though the place which hosts such performativity is allegedly appropriated by migrants themselves, even if for a short time. In this way, the fabric of citizenry was only partially replaced by care-tizenship, since the former was reproduced through symbolic borders that came across the very walls of a particular building.

The little world of the multicultural festival offered an experience of difference and inclusion to me, provided that I could rely on and trust my senses, rather than knowledge and narratives which preoccupied my mind. But at the same time, the walls of Kipseli market were not just keeping this sense of difference safe, they also were pressing, constantly reminding that there is a different world outside, the reality to which one would return. In a way, they were a clear metaphor of borders, but reversed:

\footnote{\textsuperscript{12} The video in its edited form: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUex-L_kxM}}
within these borders the hidden, private life of migrant communities, their way of life expressed in cooking, entertainment and handicrafts appeared publicly visible, yet still with clear markers that this was not the reality. Leaving the market, I considered whether it would be possible that the borders of Kipseli market could transgress across time and space: whether the festival could become a market itself, not limited to a specific date, and whether it could spill over to a street, and then to another building, and then to a little side street nearby, and then... Until the indoors space of a renovated market building truly becomes a town square of a place where I together with others would not immediately be assigned a function of the host, but also happily immerse in the pleasure of being a guest.

In this way, I engaged in a practice of imagination connected to a particular locality. Scholars have previously connected imagination to sensuous experience: instead of a common idea of imagining as a purely cognitive practice it should be approached as an embodied one (Pink 2015). According to this approach imagination is an integral part of even the most basic everyday life activities, in every instance where we make decisions about which course of action to follow, from choosing what to make for dinner to contemplating the possibilities of a new life in a distant place (Zittoun & Gillespie 2017). However, the sensuous part of imagination poses a problem of how ethnographers can approach another person’s imagination: “imagination...is rarely visible” (ibid:11). In this way, a researcher should look for occasions where imagination is externalized (ibid), as for example in the way people speak about things, or “creatively construct[ing] correspondences between our own and others’ experiences” (Pink 2015:ch 2). The imagination and practices of my respondents, related to both their experiences of bordering and their sense of belonging, is the subject of the last part of my analysis.

*Imagination and practice*

On several occasions during my fieldwork, I encountered people and situations who expressed their own agency in transgressing borders and building their bonds with places in Athens, with the city more generally or even with the country as a whole. These occasions did not relate to an imagined community in a way nationalism is
described, i.e., the connection was not made through common nationalist symbols such as flags or shared historic narratives. Instead, it developed from personal experiences of encounters with different people and places. Their narrations are cases when imagination could be seen as externalized, as discussed by Zittoun & Gillespie (2017).

One evening while engaged in an informal conversation with Christopher, who is an old friend from Athens, we came back to the topic of how we miss our lives there. I was specifically interested in what made him attached to Athens so much that he found so hard to leave it behind, since I knew well that it was a decision he did not take lightly. It actually took about 3 years of coming and going back until he made the decision to stay in Sweden. He explained it like this:

Because it was not easy to leave behind all of my history in Athens. Until I reached that decision, I needed to struggle with myself because there was so much I liked in Greece and I couldn’t leave my way of life and the culture there. It was my friends, the activism, the theater group...I have never really actually thought about why I liked it so much that I couldn’t leave it behind. But I think that the way of life was very suitable for me; the rhythm...the activities I was engaged with...there were so many choices! But the most important was my network, the people around me. That was a true connection we had, the relations were deep. That is why it was so hard to leave this behind, it was like leaving my family, it was not easy.

In his story, Christopher provides an account of an imagined community, to which he belongs even though he has since long physically departed from it. As was highlighted in the theoretical framework, imagination could be seen not only as a pillar for nationalist myths (Anderson 2006), but also as a means for constructing alternative localities and senses of belonging (Appadurai 2013). Such appropriations of imagination occurred in different settings.

Don’t know ...perhaps it’s Stockholm’s syndrome – like I said once – Athens is a hard love, like an abusive relationship. It was beautiful but at the same time hard. Everything I built there was with great effort. I think here things have been much easier, there I had to fight for everything I accomplished, and I couldn’t leave all that behind. But the most important was the relations with the people. This I still hold on to. I am still in touch with my friends from Athens, I call them as often as I can, I miss them, I want to go visit. It’s the people that make the place... When I was in Athens I never felt I was alone. I think we all need a group where we feel we belong – more than a group – I would call it a tribe. In Athens it was easy to find that. No matter what your interest in life is, you will find your tribe. You won’t feel alone... all of my true relations are back in Athens, I feel my place is there.
The street market
One striking example is a situation that I witnessed during a random visit to a street market. Street markets are very popular in Greece, especially when it comes to buying fresh vegetables and fruits that form a large part of Mediterranean diet. However, apart from fresh and relatively cheap vegetables street markets offer occasions of everyday racism and are a perfect spot to observe the quotidian othering, as plenty of vendors are undocumented migrants who work long shifts for little money. Their precarious condition, placed within a very local occasion of street-selling, shared by many Greeks, form a vantage point for expressing hatred and nationalist resentment on behalf of the customers. While buying groceries, I witnessed an elderly lady buying apples and demanding to confirm that the apples were exactly the sort written on the tag. After confirmation, she proceeded to ask the vendor where he was from. According to my biased preconceptions, she looked exactly like a person who would try to find the chance to comment on how Greece is overwhelmed by the number of foreigners or that the Greeks’ own needs are overlooked. I paused for a moment wondering whether I was going to witness yet another incident of everyday racism. To my surprise the conversation took a very different turn. When the vendor responded that he was Pakistani, the woman went on happily to narrate her travel to Lahore and how she remembered the heavy traffic and noise on the streets. The vendor laughed and said he was Lahori and that it was cool she had been there.

As Khosravi (2020) pointed out, the question “where are you from” posed to the one who looks or behaves differently is a form of control, signifying “you are not from here” and demanding a confirmation you have a right to be in a place where you are. However, in this case it was a way to create proximity between the elderly Greek lady and a younger Pakistani vendor. Whereas this incident is rather an exception from a daily business practice of Greek street markets, and I have witnessed many situations in which “where are you from” was exactly a question that allowed to perform othering, it gives an interesting insight of how such practice could be put to a different use through the agency of those involved in a conversation.

Some of my interlocutors were keen on emphasizing their own agency in the experience of settling in Athens, despite the practices of bordering and othering that they were
subjected to. One way to do so was to make connection between belonging and responsibilities. In a conversation with Mr. Muhammadi, he narrated how during the devastating fires of the previous summer in Greece, members of the migrant communities organized volunteer groups and gathered necessities to help the people affected because, as he explained, “we are a part of the society and when we talk about active participation, we mean in everything”. The same group organized helping teams during the COVID19 pandemic who were assisting vulnerable groups with information (for those who have difficulties with the Greek language) but also in daily activities, such as grocery shopping or delivery of medicines. Mr. Muhammadi also became involved in public politics, at some point being a candidate for the European Parliament with the previous government. As he explained, everyone should be aware of their responsibilities as members of the society and subsequently of their rights. He made a connection between this experience and general political context, commenting that he was very proud the prime minister of Greece personally asked him to join the campaign. Orpheus described a good place that he would like to live in through experience of mutual help: “you need to help without wanting something back… I help you, you help another”.

The interlocutors highlighting their involvement in the common causes of Athens and Greek societies emphasized their position not as guests or specifically migrants, but rather as people of multiple origin, i.e. what the theoretical literature labelled as hybrids. Maria explained it as a duality, but in a deep emotional level. She likened having two countries or nationalities to having two mothers. “I always tell my children you have two countries; you have Albania and you have Greece. It’s like having two mothers, like being raised by two mothers. How could you choose the one over the other?” Similarly, one of the protagonists of the video made during the festival narrated how she has taught her children the same, to appreciate both their country of origin and their current ones equally much. On a different note, Aphrodite insisted on her Greekness instead but in the terms of a choice, “I don’t feel very Albanian – I am but I do not feel it. I am not Greek, but I do feel Greek. I speak Greek. The mother tongue is the one in which you think… a language which you understand and identify with completely. For me, it is Greek”.

The concept of hybrid identity can be applied to migrants since “…the hybrid … serves as a ‘bridging person’, one that is both the benefactor of a cultural surplus, and the
embodiment of a new synthesis” (Papastergiadis 2000:15). At the same time the hybrid identity should not be viewed as the citizen of the world, opposing the national subject. Papastergiadis (2000) highlights the fact that the hybrid identity includes both displacement and connection, i.e., that the migrant is both someone connecting cultures and someone that has left a specific community behind. Just like Sassen’s (2003) institution of citizenship is incomplete and thus open to transformation, so is Papastergiadis’ (2000) hybrid identity, and, according to Khosravi (2010), the two are often viewed as overlapping. In how hybridity turns out in each particular case, the previous experiences and memories play a crucial role (Bauhn & Fulya Tepe 2016). This is apparent in people with hybrid identities, who resort to positive memories of their previous cultural contexts in order to envision a better life for themselves in their new home places, and this process informs the way they navigate in their current conditions, a function of imagination described by Zittoun & Gillespie (2017).

One example of this process came from Ahmed, a Pakistani man who came to Athens about five years ago in search of better life options, when talking about what he experiences as lack of freedom of religion. The mosque that he attends is an unofficial one, situated at the basement of an old building, half hidden, at Omonoia square in the city centre. He wished the mosque would be open all the time and for all. “The mosque is the house of God, it cannot belong to anyone, it should be open for all, at all times. It should be the same for the churches”. He wondered if he would be welcome in a church and answered his own question by saying no. He drew upon his memories of his childhood hometown in Pakistan in order to describe how he would like things to be in Athens. He explained that in his country the mosques are always open, their doors are never closed, anyone can go in, day or night. And there are also temples of other faiths, Christians and Hindu, all free to practice their faith out in the open. “Why can’t it be like this here as well?”, he wondered. Another example is Elpida, who referred back to her childhood memories from South Africa while describing how the ideal city would look like:

I want a world that is open, that endorses diversity instead of hate. Everyone is from somewhere, why should we accept hate? Our similarities are many more than our differences, as in culture or food. I see similarities between the Greek Easter table and the Nowruz table. We should celebrate our different holidays together. There should be multicultural fests at the schools. The problem is that we do not know each other. For example, people think that women wearing the hijab are weak, not emancipated but I have met many Afghan women, and most people do not
know how strong they are. I would like for Athens to be a multicultural city, for everyone to be free to be. For people to be distinguished for their culture, for something beautiful instead for something negative. For example, Afghan women have such beautiful, colorful scarfs. I wish for people to joke together to make innocent jokes, to be more accepting.

The observation of Elpida that people of different origin do not know each other is a call for new meaningful connections, that can become possible once they are imagined. In line with the scholarship on imagination, she builds her vision of a better future as shaped by her earlier experiences (Zittoun & Gillespie 2017):

I grew up in a multicultural society, in Johannesburg. I was used to having different friends, we were mixed. When we met for picnics, we all brought our different foods. The youth fought for diversity even during apartheid. We should know our neighbors, say good morning to each other wherever they come from. Religion is important to many people. Society should be multireligious, there should not exist a need for secret mosques, like now in Athens. I grew up in a multireligious society and we all were free to practice our religions and celebrate them, at school we used to celebrate Diwali, Passover, Orthodox Easter, Eid. This means for harmonious coexistence. I for example am against France’s prohibition of religious symbols. A city must be free where no one will need to hide. There should be places of worship for all. Where there is room for everyone to express themselves, there you have a dynamic, happy city.

Her current practices are similarly informed by her past experiences and future expectations, as she is actively engaged in advocacy for migrant rights and integration projects. Started as a volunteer, she now works full time with these issues, having left behind a previous career in fashion design.

It became clear to me through my conversations that some people I encountered put their experience in a rather proactive way, highlighting their own agency for the creation of commons, while others frame their experiences of migration as a set of occasions which happened to them. Sometimes, this difference could also be observed within the same conversation, with some experiences put in a form of personal efforts while others in a situation of non-subjectivity. In particular, this was obvious through personal narration: on one hand, a focus on pronoun “I” and the usage of active forms of verbs, and on the other hand, a frequent upbringing of “they” and passive forms of verbs. Ahmed commented on his attitude towards incidents of hostility in everyday encounters. He told me that many people treat migrants in such manner because they are foreigners and people think they have no papers.
When you don’t have papers, people think they can put you down, because you cannot stand up for yourself, but if you react, if you talk back, they stop. Sometimes people say things because they think we do not understand the language. When I talk in Greek and say what is the problem, we have all our papers in order, we pay our taxes and everything that we need, then people back down.

Similarly, Aphrodite concentrated on her own choices through her lifepath: “I chose to have people around me that would accept me for what I am, I didn’t need to change the way I am”. Mr. Yonous Muhammadi expressed a similar attitude when narrating his path, while describing how he chose to confront nationalistic groups instead of avoiding them. He narrated how, many years back, he was invited to a meeting organized by the city council on the subject of migration. When he arrived at the meeting, he realized that members of the Golden Dawn were present. Golden Dawn was a neo-Nazi organization that was at the time organized into a political party with growing influence among the public, with groups of its members roaming the streets and randomly attacking migrants, sometimes even murdering. During the meeting a member of the Golden Dawn started talking about migrants in a diminishing manner using expressions such as “filthy”, “illegals”, and “threat to Greek civilization”. There, he said, “is where you do not keep quiet”. He explained that there is no point in engaging with the like-minded since the discussion would be more of an assertion of common views. What is important is to engage with this kind of people and invalidate their hateful rhetoric.

The emphasis on personal effort also came with a different attitude to places that my interlocutors find themselves in. While all people I have encountered mostly focused on interpersonal relations instead of exact locations when describing the places they lived in, most expressed the desire to flee, while some formulated in different ways how and in which interpersonal relations they would like to find themselves, in such cases connecting it to their own agency. A desire to flee took different forms: it could either be a move to a different neighborhood or a move from the city as such.

Maria expressed dissatisfaction with the current neighborhood since she perceived it as unsafe because of high levels of criminality and hostility. She described incidents of break-ins and even a robbery with murder in the neighborhood and that an additional factor of insecurity for her was the existence of large groups of single men living together in small flats drinking and fighting. She instead hoped of one day being able to move in a different area, and she knew exactly which one, that she perceived as safe.
and family oriented, with friendly and accepting neighbors. Alex described how he moved from his previous neighborhood because of not feeling safe anymore. He told me about a shooting in a bar that he witnessed which made him feel as if he was back in the war in Afghanistan and at that moment he decided to move.

A third example is Orpheus who currently desires to move from the country entirely. He had not initially planned to migrate to Greece but in his time there he had succeeded in obtaining legal status, finding a job, creating friendships, and exercising his interest in dancing. He even had plans and hopes to open his own shop where he would import cultural artefacts from Africa. His life conditions changed entirely after an accident when he broke his leg, was unable to work or dance and over time he felt that he was abandoned by all his previous friends. Right now, he explained that he plans to leave since, as he characteristically put it, “this place has nothing more to offer me”, making the point – even if unintentionally so – that “this place” as he called it referred to his social network.

Examples of forming different interpersonal relations were equally divergent. Alex expressed the desire to settle down and have a quiet life in Athens and nowhere else with a nice Greek girl, and at the same time continue to help other migrants and refugees to find their ways in the new society. Mr. Yonous Muhammadi appreciated life in Athens in political terms. When talking about his life in Athens he mostly discussed his involvement in advocating for migrant and refugee rights. He explained that being part of a society involves active participation. In his own words: “where there is room to fight for your beliefs that is the ideal place. That is what I have in Greece”.

Perceptions of places they find themselves in are connected to the most challenging part of the discussions with my interlocutors, related to their dreams and plans. I asked them about how they imagined their lives and the places in which these lives unfold as they would like them to be. There appeared to be two different patterns in the way people imagined the ideal, some as a static image and some in a more dynamic way.

Examples of the static imagination included a quiet life in a nice neighborhood with friendly neighbors, settling down with a nice girl, return to the home country to take care of the family or even “smiling in my own home, being well together with my family”. I call this kind of imagination static because it implies an image of a good life that is static and atemporal. It brings to mind the ending of a fairy tale where the
characters get to live happily ever after. A characteristic example is Christopher’s description of the ideal place as one where all are included independently of their skin colour. However, he was quick to add that such place is impossible to exist, somehow confirming the metaphor of the fairy tale, something beautiful but not real.

The more dynamic way to imagine includes images of an open society. People described inclusion, mutual respect, a place where everyone will be free to exist, where all religions will enjoy equal status, a multicultural society where cultural differences are celebrated. Aphrodite mentioned that multicultural is not enough, the ideal is transcultural where the different cultures will interact and share their foods, their music, their celebrations together. She explained that a flourishing coexistence depends on the pluralism of different voices, “to have people around with open minds and different experiences. Living together means being open, or else it diminishes to mutual tolerance”. Also mentioned were that exploitation would not exist and that no one would be hungry. In all of these descriptions people pointed to the changes necessary in society in order for the ideal place to become possible. In this sense, this way of imagining is dynamic because it makes connections to a changing social context. Disregarding how people imagined the ideal place, they were all taken aback by the request to imagine, they made longer pauses and seemed to struggle more to find the right words for their descriptions.

Imagination opens a horizon of unique connections to others and in this way can be connected to the experience of hybridity, which all my interlocutors share albeit in different ways. Generally, the position of “in-between”, that a hybrid occupies, opens a horizon of unique agency that is not limited either to the borders of one belonging or the borders of another. A hybrid has a capability not of double vision, but of the prospect of un-bordered vision. In my conversations, such prospect appeared in relation to for example language, or national belonging. However, that hybrids have a possibility for unique vision does not necessarily mean such a possibility will be realized (Bauhn & Fulya Tepe 2016). It has been suggested that much depends on the previous experiences of hybrid people, in my case those with a migratory background, and on the way of dealing with those experiences.

Aphrodite reflected on her capability of thinking in a more complex way, due to her having two mother tongues. In her own words: “A bilingual person thinks differently,
thinks in two languages. The mind of the bilingual plays tricky games...this is the best way I can explain it”. Christopher explained that he cannot imagine there is a place for him in the world because he is not Iranian anymore, he is “someone else”, something much more that includes traits of all his encounters with different peoples and places. But he is neither Greek, nor Swedish, as he put it: “I’m someone who doesn’t have a place. It’s hard sometimes but at the same time it’s not that bad either”. He made the claim that he has changed, learned and become better through his encounters and for this reason he doesn’t feel that he belongs to a specific place which may feel confusing at times but also offers a sense of freedom. “I think the best place is no place”.

At the same time, it should be noted that hybridity does not equal the celebratory attitudes of multiculturalist narratives that tend to diminish the hardships and injustices one is subjected to (Papastergiadis 2000). I have observed in my ethnographic material that, while emphasizing their own efforts, some people seemed to paint their darker experiences in brighter colors, commonly noting “they didn’t have it that hard” and making comparisons to those who “had it harder”. This might suggest that they search for a justification for their own agency, as if they initially had no right to it, but through enunciating their privilege in comparison to others such right is obtained. Hybridity, if to be proven fruitful for personal and communal empowerment, demands an unlikely combination of affirming one’s own agency together with acknowledging one’s own experience of othering and bordering made on behalf of others. In other words, it demands a realization of injustice made by others without occupying a position of victim. For example, Aphrodite narrated how she chose not to react to an aggressive attitude towards her by a neighbor who commented on the news of her success at university with “no matter what she does she will always be an Albanian”. Aphrodite explained that it would be so easy for her to engage and expose such a person’s “inadequacy”, but she refrained, since she refuses to become cruel in return. In such manner, she would participate in reproducing the vicious cycle of othering, or in her own words: “just because someone throws a ball at you it doesn’t mean you need to catch it”.

The division in static and dynamic imagination offers a way to see the level of agency provided by hybrid experience. Dynamic imagination is a case when hybridity is put to its most fruitful use, but it should always be made in connection to realizing one’s own experience of injustice and othering in order not to fall into common narratives of
multiculturalism or “a just globalization”. In the latter case, they contribute to the bordered injustice rather than offer alternatives to it.

6. Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have investigated the experiences of people with migratory background in the context of Athens to see which possibilities they have for agency in creating and imagination of a place to which they can belong. My work has concentrated on bordering practices that exist both in the interactions with state institutions and in everyday life. It has shown how such practices affect the sense of belonging on behalf of the people with migratory background, and which effect such practices have on their active involvement in the society they find themselves in as well as imagination of its alternative transformations.

This study has been guided by two research questions:

- How do people with migratory experience in Athens envision their possibilities?
- How do migratory experiences affect this vision?

My research elucidated harsh conditions that such people meet in Athens, that is related to the nation-state institution of citizenship. Persons with different origin described in different ways how both official institutions and Greek citizens themselves perform borders that divide them from those perceived as foreigners, especially those different in appearance, often by utilizing their bodies as tools of exclusion. These processes have been described and documented well in the existing literature, that tends to focus on the negative and dehumanizing aspects of migration.

Yet the most unexpected result of this thesis is that, despite the legal arrangements made specifically to complicate the lives of migrants in Greece and turn them into disposable labor, and plenty instances of everyday racism and discrimination, many of my interlocutors did express their sense of belonging to Athens and some considered it the best place they could live in. Hybridity is a concept that allows me to partially capture this paradox: those located in-between, while no longer located on a specific side of a symbolic border, have both a chance for disempowerment and a possibility for unique agency stemming from their double, or even triple, vision of Greek society and its
arrangements. While most of the people I encountered are placed in a precarious position of disempowerment, seeking the possible ways to escape it, some also imagine Athens as a common place and realize their imagination in concrete practice, such as claiming their right to the city. This difference can only partially be attributed to the difference in their social position. People showing a desire and capability of imagining alternative social arrangements, thus claiming their agency for the creation of commons, were both born in Greece and moved to the city from a different country, some of them had experience of being homeless, and many looked different in appearance, thus potential subjects to racial and ethnic discrimination. This fact led me to the conclusion that among the two divisions relating to how hybridity could be realized - whether it is imposed or chosen, and whether it is accepted or rejected - it is the latter one which is the most decisive. Through engagement with this diverse group, performing deep conversations and participant observation, I have also proposed the division of their imagination in static and dynamic. Static imagination presupposes a certain teleology, a closed ending such as those common to fairy tales where a certain task is accomplished and everyone “lives happily ever after”. Dynamic imagination, on the other hand, is a process open to social change, heavily depending on social context and striving to shape it without a specific closure. It is dynamic imagination that offers the best building ground for a common belonging through cohabitation and the construction of shared spaces to which everyone has a right. Static and dynamic imagination should not be seen as mutually exclusive, as these are only the concepts that I proposed based on my analysis.

Previous literature on hybrid agency suggested that the potential of hybridity to turn towards agency rather than disempowerment is dependent of previous experience of a subject, with negative experiences more likely to result in disempowerment. My research puts a question on such connection, emphasizing rather the subjectivity of migrants themselves. At the same time, this claim should not be read as a neoliberal celebration of multiculturalism, against which theories of hybridity warn: the point is not to relocate the responsibility for abuse and exploitation on migrants themselves (this responsibility lays fully with Greek authorities and exact individuals who perform discrimination and the acts of othering), but to see people with migratory background first of all in the light of their own capabilities.
If I had an opportunity to study my subject further or in more depth, I would like to pay more attention to the youngest people with migratory background. Through my conversations, a hope for children being able to bring the necessary social change was often mentioned. Although outside the scope of this study, I would like to explore the hybrid imagination of the coming generations as a promising catalyst for change, the same way that I witnessed it on the playground where my son met his new friend.

Figure 3: Children’s play. Photo by the author.
List of references


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