



**Rethinking agency:
Towards a collaborative approach on
political agency of people on the move in
the Mediterranean**

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Background Rationale and Content

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Abstract

Situated at the intersection of the autonomy of migration approach and critical citizenship studies, the working paper proposes a research approach and paradigm change within Mediterranean migration scholarship that integrates people on the move as active agents influencing knowledge production. Illustrating the suggested approach, the working paper uses the case example of political agency and acts of citizenship of people on the move in Libya. To examine how communicative acts of citizenship enable people on the move to express political agency, the proposal suggests a qualitative, collaborative, and explorative research design using photo-elicitation and photo voice methodologies. While people on the move are mostly constructed as voiceless victims in dominant humanitarian discourse and as security threats in dominant media and policy discourse, the research aims to amplify the voices of people on the move themselves within a post-colonial and reflective research paradigm. By shifting the focus to subject-centred understanding of the situation of people on the move in Libya, the working paper proposes a conceptualization that will be able to challenge dominant discourses that construct people on the move as inferior 'Other' and suggest new conceptual frameworks to conduct research on mobility.

Keywords

Libya, Migration, Agency, Acts of Citizenship, Autonomy of Migration

Author's biographical note



Isabell Nohr (isabell.nohr@posteo.net) holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology and Political Science (2019) from Universität Münster and a master's degree in Migration Studies (2023) from Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Her master's Thesis titled "'We were deliberately silenced. But not anymore' - acts of citizenship and political agency of people on the move in Libya" on which this working paper is based was selected as the Third Most Outstanding Thesis in Migration Studies of 2022-2023. After finishing her master's degree, she went back to being active in civil search and rescue in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Her main research interest is Mediterranean migration studies with an emphasis on criminalization of migration and political agency of people on the move, highly connected to her work outside of the academic field.

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1. Introduction

“We tried to raise our voices and spread our stories. We taught these to institutions, politicians, and journalists but apart from very few interested ones, our stories remained unheard. We were deliberately silenced. But not anymore” (Refugees in Libya n.d.-a.)

This working paper is proposing a research approach and paradigm change within Mediterranean Migration scholarship that integrates people on the move¹ (PoM) not merely as a category of analysis but rather as active agents shaping and influencing processes of knowledge production. Therefore, it seeks to invite scholars to rethink research agendas to involve PoM in knowledge production, offering perspectives on mobility that shift the focus of dominant notions of passivity or threat. Certainly, with dominant constructions of PoM as voiceless victims in humanitarian discourse and security threats in media and policy discourse, a research approach that aims to amplify the voices of PoM themselves within a post-colonial and reflective research paradigm is useful and needed. The working paper proposes a bottom-up perspective on Mediterranean migration. To further this research agenda, the working paper is zooming in on protests and community-led organisations of PoM, proposing Libya as a case study. Those community-led organisations offer valuable insight into the situation of PoM in Libya as well as forms of protest, self-representation, that can be more generally summarized under the concept of agency. This agency challenges dominant perceptions of PoM either as violent ‘intruders’ or poor, agency-less ‘victims’. In dominant discourses, perspectives of PoM are rarely heard. Libyan detention centres or other sites in Libya where PoM regularly suffer violence and other human rights abuses, are notoriously hard to reach for

¹ The terminology used for those on the move in public discourse as well as academia is highly politicized, especially in a political environment where the situation at Europe’s borders has been framed as ‘migration crisis’ (Crawley & Skleparis 2018). Social scientists in general, and migration scholars are faced with a dilemma of categories when conducting research. While categories are inherently problematic, they are needed (Dahinden et al. 2020). Rather than being neutral or natural, categories such as migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, expat are embedded in a specific political and historical context and therefore produce situated knowledge (ibid.). Furthermore, categories tend to turn people into administrative objects rather than active agents (ibid.). To reflect on this performative and perspectival character of categories, the working paper uses the term people on the move. It is used to reflect on the complex relationship between political, social, and economic drivers for migration that are changing over time and space (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018: 52). The term recognizes that the boundaries between different labels such as “economic migrants” or “refugees” are not always clear and is therefore mindful of the power that labelling people on the move one way or the other holds.

humanitarian agencies, media outlets and researchers alike. Therefore, listening to the voices of PoM and giving importance to their testimonies, narratives and forms of self-representation and agency are of particular importance. While the chosen example of the Libyan border scape is specific in its context, the research methodology, agenda, and approach have broader implications. Therefore, this working paper is putting forth a way of approaching mobility from below with a collaborative research methodology that is mainly absent from migration scholarship until now.

To achieve this, in the first section, the working paper starts with outlining the foundations of the reflective and post-colonial research paradigm that is proposed. This offers the foundation to the conceptual framework to approach PoM's agency. Then, firstly, agency as a general framework will be conceptualized. After, the two main bodies of literature that are informing this working paper will be outlined: the autonomy of migration (AoM) approach and critical citizenship studies (CCS).

Starting from this conceptual framework, in the second section, a short literature review specifically addressing agency of PoM in Libya will be provided connecting the conceptual development to the proposed case study. Establishing a gap in the literature, this is the starting point for the operationalization of the research approach and paradigm change this working paper is suggesting. Hence, in the second section, to illustrate the proposed innovative research approach, this working paper uses the Libyan mobility context as an example. Starting with a contextualization of the Libyan border, the working paper will continue to propose a way of approaching the context within migration scholarship that starts from the perspective of PoM themselves. While the working paper is proposing a research agenda that is highly connected to mobility to and through Libya, it argues that the methodology could be usefully applied to other contexts of mobility.

Paramount to any research approach, agenda, and paradigm in migration scholarship, especially one that aims to look at mobility from a bottom-up perspective, amplifying the voices of PoM is a thorough and critical reflection of ethical considerations as well as limitations. Hence, this presents the third section of the working paper.

In the concluding remarks, the working paper will sketch the contributions of this research agenda regarding the Libyan border scape as well as a broader context of ethical, reflective research on mobility.

2. Conceptual development

2.1. A reflective and post-colonial research paradigm

Epistemological debates within critical sociology, postcolonial theory and critical social anthropology inform the research paradigm of the working paper. Therefore, special attention is given to reflexivity as it is especially important when studying mobility-related topics as there is a link between colonialism and patterns of migration (Mains et al. 2013). Attempting for reflexivity means being aware of power differentials between the researcher and the researched, before during as well as after the research process and alludes to a need of constant reflection (Iosifides 2018). This means thinking about the questions that Moore posed of “whose knowledge; what sort of knowledge; what constitutes the social” (1996: 1). This results in an attempt of situated knowledge production that centres the inclusion of marginalized voices (Dahinden et al. 2020). What emerges from these conceptual ideas is reflexivity “as a process of ‘decentering’ by distancing one’s research from well-established ideas while developing alternative ones” (ibid.: 2). Important to keep in mind here, is that when starting fieldwork in a research environment, the researcher is not only entering a new physical and cultural context but that it also involves navigating a complex net of social relationships and power dynamics that are inherent in all human interactions and behaviours (McSweeney 2019). Here, it is fundamental to highlight that researcher as well as the researched have a multitude of positionalities in everyday life connected to structural social position on the one hand and social positioning as a process on the other hand (Shinozaki 2012).

Starting from these thoughts on reflexivity, the working paper will apply the broader interpretative framework of postcolonialism to conceptualize agency of PoM. The postcolonial lens provides a „studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effect” (Quayson 2005: 96). However, postcolonialism, in the sense it is used in this working paper, does not only apply the broader lens of keeping in mind the present legacies of colonialism, but it also aims to use a post-colonial way of approaching

the topic methodically. This means, keeping in mind bigger frameworks of power dynamics that have grown historically and involve local actors and states, as well as power dynamics between Global North and Global South generally. Hence, a post-colonial perspective challenges ideas of a universal standpoint of knowledge production being existent (Anderson 2013). This paradigm acknowledges the need of a knowledge production from the perspective of the marginalized and racialized subjects whose voices have been muted in dominant discourse and knowledge production. This means that the knowledge produced aims to be grounded in critical consciousness to unmask unequal relations of power and issues of domination and subordination that are based on dominant notions of 'race', 'gender' or class relations. Put simply, the research aims to produce knowledge that recognizes the wisdom of 'the people' it is aiming to write in solidarity with. These paradigms are fundamental to the research process and have been at the core of the conceptual development that will be outlined below. They are the backbones justifying the chosen bodies of literature that are informing all aspects of the working paper.

2.2. A conceptual framework to approach people on the move's agency

Proposing a reflective, innovative research approach and agenda regarding the agency of PoM, necessarily starts with a critical and well thought-through conceptualization of agency itself. In public and policy discourse, there are two dominant representations of PoM's agency, as "dangerous agency as unknowable, risky bodies, criminals, and potential terrorists; an immoral agency as fraudsters, queue jumpers, and welfare scroungers; or no agency at all as refugees, victims, of trafficking, and forced migrants more broadly" (Mainwaring 2016: 1). However, within migration scholarship, there are different approaches contesting hegemonic representations of agency, although not all use the term 'agency' (ibid.). This working paper aligns with Mainwaring's (2016) perspective on PoM's agency, positioning them as active agents of and within international relations. As such, their actions not only shape the micro levels of everyday life but also influence macro-level phenomena such as state policies, relations, and the meso-level aspects encompassing social, economic, institutional frameworks that impact migratory processes (ibid.). However, conceptualizing agency in this way, it is important to underline, that this theoretical approach does not attempt to overshadow the significant challenges, structural

barriers to mobility, rights, and equality that PoM are facing (ibid.). This definition aspires to foreground agency not as a simple act of choice but instead give space to understanding “decision making, the room for manoeuvre, opportunity structures and migration trajectories within the contexts of modern nation-states and the global capitalist system” (Anderson and Ruhs 2010: 178). This broad definition of the concept aims to understand how a person creates their own subjectivity in relation to their needs in a specific social context (Safouane et al. 2020). In defining agency broadly, from a methodological perspective, it is then possible to gain knowledge on a large scope of subjectivities that PoM adopt during different stages of migratory trajectories (ibid.).

2.3. A synthesis of autonomy of migration approaches and critical citizenship studies

Following this conceptualization of the term agency, the working paper builds on two bodies of literature: autonomy of migration (AoM) approaches as well as critical citizenship studies (CCS). While there are some tensions between proponents of these two lines of thinking, this working paper argues that bringing them together offers a useful lens to approach mobility from below.

2.3.1. Autonomy of Migration (AoM)

AoM is a theoretical and activist approach that has been developed by anti-racist activists and critical scholars since the 1990s (Scheel 2019). One starting point of AoM’s argument was a criticism of the alleged omnipotent border regime of Fortress Europe, arguing that this metaphor depicts PoM as victims in need of support and that it underplays their ability to defy and negotiate border controls (Scheel 2019). AoM scholars such as Papadopolous and Tsianos (2013) or De Genova and Peutz (2010) have highlighted that when looking at migration from a starting point from below, it becomes clear that securitised migration regimes are in fact not there to block migration completely, but rather trying to institutionalize migration by having control over its speed and magnitude. As such, AoM approaches are based on a connection to Marxist ideas that invite us to rethink the everchanging mechanisms of labour exploitation and regimes of accumulation that produce PoM as differentially included subjects of labour (Papadopolous and Tsianos 2013).

In one of the first contributions to AoM, Moulier-Boutang and Garson stated that migratory movements do not strictly follow the laws of the neoliberal market and could not be explained by simple explanations of demand and offer (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2020). Rather, they found that there is a certain autonomy in migration (ibid.). Hence, looking at migration through a one-sided economic lens is overshadowing the fact that there is a primacy of mobility in the history of capitalist development and as such any understanding of migration needs to start from this bottom-up perspective (Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2015). Generally, Scholars of AoM reject the orthodox, economist, or static understandings that see migration as the result of simple push or pull factors in turn rendering PoM as passive objects simply responding to socioeconomic needs or pressures (Stierl 2017; Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias & Pickles 2015; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007). This does not mean autonomy as complete self-government or independence from attempts at state-regulation and control (Scheel 2015). Rather, many AoM proponents interpret autonomy as the “governmentality’s other” (Sammadar 2005:10; cf. Scheel 2015; Stierl 2017). This relationship is characterised by its unresolvedness that is initiated by PoM’s practices of appropriation of mobility within the border regime, by them exercising autonomy (Scheel 2015, 2019).

Within AoM PoM are taken seriously as central actors in the migration process as they make migration and border regimes the terrain of political struggles (Scheel 2015). Hence, migration itself is to be understood as a political practice that directly challenges the social and economic status quo (Scheel 2015; Papadopolous, Stephenson & Tsianos 2008; Mitropoulos 2006; Mezzadra 2011, 2004; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). In this perspective, the figure of the person on the move emerges as political actor allowing for a contextualisation that is contrary to depoliticised notions of dominant discourses of humanitarian crisis where the root causes of migration are outside of Europe (De Genova 2017). AoM in this sense as Papadopoulos and Tsianos put it is “training our senses to see movement before capital (but not independent from it) and mobility before control (but not disconnected from it)” (2013: 184).

2.3.2. Critical Citizenship Studies (CCS)

Like AoM, the field of CCS encompasses a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches. CCS within the field citizenship studies can be seen as an approach that has arisen since the 1990s as a response to the fact that international mobility has challenged dominant definitions of citizenship as a mere legal category or status. CCS aimed to provide alternative models of citizenship, challenging traditional conceptualizations of citizenship as holding the official legal status in a nation-state (Isin & Turner 2002). They broadened it to include a multitude of political struggles that are claiming citizenship without legally possessing this status (ibid.). The resulting definition of citizenship looks at its political, cultural, and symbolic nature, rather than only at its legal status (Isin 2008).

Many CCS scholars highlight the dimensions of criminalization of migration and citizenship. They underline that illegality is produced and accompanied by a heightened vulnerability of PoM regarding their everyday and legislative situation in a process of framing them as criminals (Barker 2017; de Genova 2017; Macías-Rojas 2016). For example, Squire (2011) shows that irregularity, as a produced condition is founded on different levels, through movements and agencies of national, international and/or transnational agencies as well as movements and agencies of PoM and citizens. Aas (2014) shows how when people do not have access to formal membership this becomes one of the essential factors putting them at risk of deportation and territorial exclusion, essential elements of the criminalization of migration. What these conceptualizations of citizenship have in common is the realization that

“the citizens and noncitizen are not two binary categories; instead, they are categories that exist along a continuum that is socially constructed within the broader contexts and scales of power, including those that define and give durability to categories and gradations of legality and illegality” (Wonders & Jones 2019: 140).

Within this approach, citizenship is seen as performance, performed in multiple sites and on multiple levels (Wonders 2016). Starting from this conceptual foundation, this working paper mainly focuses on ‘acts of citizenship’ by Isin (2008). He aims to investigate acts of citizenship as distinct from, although related to, the status and habitus of citizenship (ibid.). In this way, it is important to investigate acts of citizenship “in a way that is irreducible to either status or habitus, while still valuing this distinction” (ibid.: 18). This conception of

citizenship is relational and “attempts to capture it as a contested field through which rights and responsibilities are articulated in the constitution of a body politic; in other words, citizenship is constituted through political struggle” (Isin 2012: 151) From this perspective, it is fundamental to focus on instances where, regardless of status or substance, individuals constitute themselves as citizens (Isin 2008). He theorizes ‘acts of citizenship’ as:

“those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle” (ibid.: 39).

This line of thinking can also be seen within AoM scholars like Mezzadra, looking at acts of PoM, regardless their legal status, underlining that by those acts PoM position themselves as citizens with rights (Mezzadra 2011).

2.3.3. Synthesizing and Justifying AoM and CCS as conceptual lenses

Numerous proponents of AoM approaches consider efforts to broaden citizenship as fundamentally flawed because they are concerned that such attempts would fail to fully recognize its inherent exclusivity (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016). From the perspective of AoM, it is often argued that citizenship is a sovereign and ultimate state instrument that is in place to regulate belonging and therefore is not able to conceptualize “communal possibilities beyond the script of the nation-state” (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016: 533). One response to such critique of CCS scholars is that AoM scholar’s conceptualisation of power is too reductive and narrow (McNevin 2013).

AoM, on the other hand, has been criticized by several scholars regarding the risk of leading to a romanticisation of migration (Alabi et al. 2005). It is therefore paramount that an analysis through the lens of AoM situates PoM’s struggles within their necessity of making concessions and compromises during their trajectory, on top of the possibly of failure (Scheel 2015). Another recurrent criticism of AoM is that it does not sufficiently address the different conditions under which migration takes place (Omwenyke 2004; Düvell 2006; Sharma 2008). Scheel (2019) responding to such criticisms has called for AoM scholars to consider these subject positions for example of class, race, gender, nationality, age, sexual orientation while keeping in mind access to social networks and economic

resources when studying how PoM appropriate mobility in an increasingly securitized border regime.

Keeping these tensions and critiques between AoM and CCS in mind, the working paper aims to highlight the multitude of expressions of political mobilization of PoM and proposing a way of addressing them within Mediterranean migration studies. The underlying aim is to look at concrete strategies and actions PoM employ. Doing so through the lens of AoM and CCS are useful, as both conceptual approaches foreground the subjectivity and agency of PoM (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016). Both theoretical lenses share that they have a normative concern with looking at politics from below (Moulin & Thomaz 2016). It is argued, that although there are tensions and differences within AoM and CCS frameworks, they can be overcome and put into a fruitful synthesis for the working paper. AoM allows for scholars to interpret phenomena of mobility in truly interdisciplinary terms as De Genova has put it

“deftly bridging the political and social sciences, integrating critical analyses of law, policy, and politics with fine-grained ethnographic insights into the everyday experiences and perspectives arising from the lived encounters between the autonomy and subjectivity of migration with the tactics and technologies of bordering” (2017: 25).

When studying agency of PoM, AoM is a useful starting point as it makes their practices the starting point and focus of the analysis that allows for a theorisation of the border regime and migratory trajectories that comes from below (Scheel 2019). AoM allows us to see community-led initiatives of PoM as a form of social movement and to understand the situation that PoM are facing framing them as important political actors that are mobilizing resources, claims and networks and are developing political strategies. CCS, on the other hand, allows for a focus on understanding how PoM create new forms of political community through their mobilizations that go beyond classic definitions of citizenship. Looking at communicative acts of citizenship with an AoM starting point, will allow the research to precisely look at ways in which PoM challenge borders (be it physical nation-state borders or ontological ones). Following, Nyers and Rygiel (2012), the working paper assumes that through looking at struggles of PoM starting from their perspective, there is potential to foster innovative ways of thinking about political engagement and envision new types of politics that we wish to see in the world. These two bodies of literature allow

to conceptually frame mobility in a bottom-up manner. The working paper builds on this conceptual development, to propose a case study as a way of operationalizing those theoretical discussions and thoughts.

However, it is important to underline, that the decisions on which foundational concepts are used for this working paper, have still been with the researcher that is applying those to the context of mobility in Libya. In this way, these concepts can be seen as the guiding lines that led to the operationalization and concept of the proposed research, they inform the procedural decisions made by the researcher. In the proposed innovative and activist way of approaching agency of PoM, however, these concepts might or might not be used in the end by the research collaborators as they see fitting to their situations and to make their narratives heard. In this way the concepts can be seen as preliminary and with the potential to be changed in the active research that is proposed.

3. Operationalizing this innovative research approach in the Libyan context

Before developing a way of operationalizing the above-outlined research approach, agenda, and paradigm that this working paper argues is needed in Mediterranean migration scholarship, it is paramount that this proposal can merely be seen as one way of operationalization. That is to say, the working paper hopes to illustrate the process of developing a case study that starts with a reflective and post-colonial research paradigm. It aims to show how these initial conceptual developments and ideas are a red line that are within the research process from beginning to end. The case study therefore aims to give an illustrative example, one that hopefully inspires other migration scholars to approach mobility from a bottom-up perspective.

In proposing this, the researcher recognizes that there are already bottom-up approaches within qualitative migration scholarship that we can see in different participatory research methodologies within sociology, anthropology, or other social sciences. They use tools such as field research with participant observation or narrative-style interviewing. However, the novel approach this working paper is proposing is different in the way that PoM are collaborators in the research, rather than participants,

given a different complexity to qualitative research than other more common methodologies.

In the following, the working paper will hence present the case study of agency of PoM in Libya, delving into one way of approaching this topic within Mediterranean migration scholarship.

3.1. Literature review

There are several examples of PoM's agency taking shape in different forms, in Libya and the surrounding border scapes as well as globally. As Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl (2016) have pointed out, they can be seen as global struggles around the right to movement *via-à-vis* the intensification of restrictive border regimes. These mobilisations have different forms such as marches, hunger strikes, occupations of public sites or protest camps and with different involved actors such as PoM themselves or people and organisations in solidarity with them (*ibid.*). Against the backdrop of several forms of agency exercised by PoM in Libya, different approaches in migration scholarship can be seen. Still, there is a limited number of studies on PoM's agency in Libya generally. Hence, through an extensive search for literature, first using the keywords *refugee*, *people on the move* and *migrant agency Libya*, the search has been broadened by also using the terms of *resistance*, *protest*, *acts of citizenship* and *self-representation* as they fall under the conceptual framework of agency, the working paper has established a gap in the literature. The need for the proposed case study is underlined especially by its foundation in a reflective and postcolonial research paradigm starting from a synthesis of AoM and CCS. While as stated there are some studies addressing PoM's agency in Libya, none of them is implementing a collaborative research methodology, that this working paper argues is paramount to shift processes of knowledge production to come from below. So, while there is a growing number of studies on PoM's agency, this working paper argues that they oftentimes lack reflexivity regarding power imbalances in the process of knowledge production. Furthermore, there is very little literature that synthesizes AoM with CCS perspectives. Answering to this gap in the literature, in the following, the working paper will present Libya as a potential case study, thereby outlining the possible operationalization of this put forth research approach.

3.2. Contextualization of the Libyan border scape: fragmentation and generalized violence

A well thought-out and reflective case study should be prefaced by a thorough contextualization of the mobility topic at hand which will hereafter follow. In the following, an outline of mobility patterns to and through Libya will be given, first contextualizing the situation historically. After, special attention will be given to the situation after the Arab Spring that shifted power relations from 2011 on as well as European externalization policies. The section ends with a description of the situation of PoM in Libya in the contemporary context. This contextualization is paramount to then conduct research on the mobility topic at hand: agency of PoM within that border scape.

Libya has held a prominent position in the EU migration crisis narrative, particularly since 2015, and has been widely depicted as the primary entry point into Europe for irregular migration (Sanchez 2020). But contrary to this Eurocentric discourse, Libya has historically served as a destination country for PoM, rather than as transit location (Puig 2017; Hamood 2006). At the end of the 20th century, Libya was a popular destination for people to stay temporarily, gain money and then return to their home countries (Hamood 2006). Generally, migration to Libya is characterized by shifts and an everchanging situation for PoM with the status being directly influenced by political relations between Libya and countries of origin which regularly have been used as pretext for removing labour migrants from the country (Hamood 2006). During the Qaddafi regime from 1969 to 2011, migration governance was used as a tool to shape domestic and foreign policy, mostly relying on a narrative of framing PoM as 'other' and perpetrating a discourse of fear and security (Achnich 2022a). In the 2000s, migration evolved increasingly as a political concern among African as well as European governments which led to a multitude of bilateral agreements between Libya and the EU, and especially Libya and Italy that is known as the Treaty of Friendship in 2008. This resulted in a general deterioration of the situation of PoM, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, as policies have become increasingly restrictive (Achnich 2022a). Hence, by the mid-2000s, this trend of engaging Libya as fundamental part of the EU's attempts to externalize migration and asylum policies became clear (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019).

Closely intertwined with these developments, it is crucial to consider another significant backdrop, a current political landscape where institutions and rule of law have mostly collapsed (Achnich 2022a). The second civil war in Libya since 2014 has influenced the situation of PoM. The contemporary conflict is multifaced and ranges from tensions between competing governments, several rival armed groups and militias, conflicts between federalists and nationalists, local tribes, and influence from powers outside of the country such as Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and the NATO (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou 2020). Additionally, the context of prolonged conflict and fragmentation of power leaves a situation where there is little to no room for non-governmental or intra-governmental organizations to go beyond very limited capacities of humanitarian assistance supporting PoM (Cuttitta 2023). The ongoing conflict also led to a collapse of fundamental parts of the Libyan economy (Achnich 2022b). Consequently, this has led to a deteriorating situation for people who moved to Libya in search of employment opportunities and can be identified as one of the factors motivating PoM to decide attempting to move on from Libya, often through the Central Mediterranean route. Currently, three competing 'governments' are attempting to gain power linked to several different armed groups and militias (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019). This leads to a complex situation that can also be seen in the realm of migration. There are several different ministries with responsibilities related to border control and migration management (ibid.). Hence, mobility in Libya is characterised by a multitude of extra-legal bordering practices where actors range from criminal(ized) to state actors, including facilitators of mobility², criminal groups, militias, police, immigration officials, border guards and Libyan citizens, often following the aim to extort money, highly connected to the difficult economic situation (Achnich 2022b).

With PoM's departures from Libya becoming a prominent focal point in media and policy, the process of the spectacle of migration control in the Central Mediterranean has led to an increasingly repressive climate, that includes violent and sometimes even extra-legal measures of what often gets called the "war against illegal migration" (Raeymaekers

² The working paper recognizes the fact that mobility facilitation has been framed as migrant smuggling, as a direct consequence of migration enforcement largely dictated by the EU (Sanchez 2020). By using the term 'facilitation' rather than 'smuggling', the working paper aims to highlight that what has been framed as criminalized networks of migrant smugglers are rather a continuum of mobility strategies that have been practiced historically by PoM in North Africa as well as a branch of economic activity in the region(ibid.).

2014). Additionally, the EU has also been putting continuous effort into countries further South on what is called the central Mediterranean route, aiming to prevent irregular migration from countries such as Niger and Mali (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019). This has resulted in a strengthening of borders and more intense border control along the trans-Saharan routes as well as the Central Mediterranean border zone (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou 2020; Puig 2020a; Puig 2020b). These externalization efforts by the EU to stop all irregular migration from as close to the countries of origin as possible is based on the wrongful assumption that trans-Saharan mobility is merely the first step on the way to Europe (Brachet 2018). Hence, these externalization policies not only have influenced the situation of PoM in Libya but across the region. This attempt at containing trans-Saharan mobility that is one of the main objectives of the EU in the region does not result in PoM not crossing borders but rather leads to a situation of intensified vulnerability (Hannaford 2020). The cooperation between EU countries and Libya has been criticized from its start for failing to protect human rights of PoM (Hamood 2008). Especially, the cooperation regarding search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean Sea has been under scrutiny, pointing towards the fact that Libya cannot be considered a port of safety for PoM (Reyhani et al. 2019; Tondini 2010). This fortification of borders in the region is growing although migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe is limited in absolute and relative numbers, and most sub-Saharan migrants in North Africa have no intention of leaving their continent (Brachet 2018; Hannaford 2020; Sanchez 2020; Puig 2021). The result of the portrayal of Libya as a transit country is an emergence of the phenomenon of 'migrant smuggling' in media and policy discourse that in most of the region is a long-standing and local practice rather than a new phenomenon (Brachet 2018). The strengthening of border zones in the Saharan region as well as the Central Mediterranean leads to a situation where death has become a constitutive part of migration governance while PoM are being abandoned in deserts and at sea (McMahon & Sigona 2021). In this context, what Achtnich (2022b) has called mobility-immobility dynamic has emerged. This mobility-immobility dynamic results in prolonged periods of detention of criminalized PoM and a general vulnerability regarding different kinds of violence.

According to UNHCR, there are 31 detention centres for PoM that are spread across Libya (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019). These detention facilities are documented,

for example by UNHRC (2021), to be involved in activities such as extortion and demanding ransoms for the release of detainees as well as inhumane living conditions including evidence of beatings, torture, rape, and even murder taking place within them (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019). Furthermore, Libya is not a signatory country of the 1951 convention and does not recognize the existence of refugee or asylum seekers on its territory as well as the documented abuse and violence that PoM face in the country (Baldwin-Edwards & Lutterbeck 2019). This non-recognition of refugees and asylum seekers on Libyan territory results in PoM more easily being labelled as 'illegal' and hence criminalized and facing abuse, violence, and exploitation (Cuttitta 2023). Sub-Saharan PoM are generally associated with the worst situation in Libya at the intersection of a general criminalization of migration together with anti-Black racism, closely connected to legacies of slavery that have exerted a significant influence on the societal, political, and economic frameworks of Libyan society³ (Hahonou 2021).

Within this mobility context that is characterized by generalized violence and fragmentation, instances of agency exercised by PoM can be witnessed. This working paper argues that in a context of such high levels of criminalization and violence that PoM are facing, looking at those acts of resistance and agency is of particular importance.

3.3. Research problem

Looking at acts of agency of PoM in Libya within the suggested research paradigm and approach is valuable for various reasons. Firstly, it will invite scholars to shift away from research designs focussing on top-down approaches but rather give space for PoM to influence knowledge production. The suggested research aims to build on previous scholars presenting a more nuanced view of PoM's agency and self-representation in the context of Libya.

³ From the 6th to the 20th century, individuals of sub-Saharan descent were subjected to capture, enslavement, and trading across the Sahara region (Hahonou 2021). Slaves from various regions within sub-Saharan Africa were transported to destinations North of the Sahara Desert, including the Mediterranean shores and the Middle East (ibid.). Scholars widely agree that this history of slavery has profoundly influenced the contemporary perceptions and connections between Blackness and slavery in the region until today (ibid). An in-depth analysis of Anti-Blackness in Libya or the region is beyond the scope of the working paper.

As already described, Libya holds a significant role in the narrative surrounding the so-called migration crisis within dominant policy maker and media discourse in the European Union. It is therefore even more important to create room for counter narratives that diverge from these Eurocentric and mostly non-factional viewpoints. Conducting research that centres PoM's subjectivities and includes them in the knowledge production is useful because it holds the power to contradict dominant discourses that portray Libya solely as a transit country where all PoM attempt to reach European soil. It allows for understanding the situation in Libya from the perspective of affected people themselves.

While it is important to underline that Libya has been falsely represented as solely a transit country to Europe, it is nevertheless relevant to mention that there is a significant number of PoM that are attempting to leave Libya by unseaworthy boats. Until now, 2498 people have been reported missing in the Central Mediterranean in 2023 (IOM 2023a). The actual number is likely to be significantly higher. Further South, in the Saharan border zone, number of deaths by PoM are assumed to be around twice as high by IOM, although there is no reliable data available (Miles & Nebehay 2017). Additionally, to these death tolls, in 2022⁴, 24,684 PoM are reported to have been intercepted by Libyan authorities and pulled back to Libya (IOM 2023b). The European Union is providing financial and other forms of support to Libyan authorities to reduce the number of people reaching Europe. Conducting studies on the situation in Libya is crucial for illustrating the experiences of PoM, documenting human rights violations and acts of violence. Ultimately, these efforts aim to establish accountability for both EU and Libyan authorities addressing the violence and challenges faced by PoM and highlight the involvement of European authorities.

To sum up, the research aims to analyse how in a dominant discourse of 'Othering', PoM that have been or currently are in Libya meet this hostile environment with agency and resistance in the form of self-representation. Based on the conceptual lens and gaps in the literature, the proposed research starts with the following questions:

⁴ Data on interceptions by so-called Libyan coast guards from 2023 is not yet available on IOM's Missing Migrants Project database.

How do communicative acts of citizenship enable people on the move to express political agency? How do groups like Refugees in Libya facilitate people's ability to express and communicate their experiences?

While these are broad questions leading the beginning of the research process, the collaborative nature of the research aims to actively engage research participants as collaborators and enable them to shape and change the research question and focus together with the (institutionalized) researcher.

3.4. A proposal of a methodology

Starting from this research problem and aiming for an innovative research practice and approach, the working paper will in the following suggest a practical operationalization that would allow to put a new approach and paradigm within migration scholarship in the Mediterranean into practice.

The working paper proposes a research design that is qualitative, explorative, and contextual in nature. The qualitative research design allows to gain knowledge on PoM in Libya and their perceptions on self-representation and agency, something that little is known about for the moment. The reason of choosing an explorative design is to allow the research to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. The research is framed as contextual as the topic studied is highly connected to its immediate context of PoM's reality in Libya as well as their perspectives.

When deciding on a research method within a post-colonial and reflexive research paradigm there were two main points that needed to be reflected on. For one, the research aims to produce transformative knowledge and aims to acknowledge research participants as active agents influencing and leading the process. Secondly, the theoretical framework of the research must allow for an in-depth analysis of the research topic within a broader historical and contemporary context of (post)colonialism. Concretely, this means beginning with the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the people the research aims to talk about while placing the topic in context. For this, the working paper proposes critical arts-based inquiry to examine how PoM in Libya experience their ways of self-representation and agency. As stated by Finlay (2008: 71), "Arts-based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research

that... can be used to advances a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequity". However, I suggest that aiming to listen to PoM perspectives and aiming to reflect on dominant forms of knowledge production as a migration scholar is by no means subversive or revolutionary. Nevertheless, as existing postcolonial scholarship suggest, voices of PoM are rarely incorporated in research on PoM, making such a research proposal political by nature and thereby justifying the chosen methodology.

The methodology of photo voice is useful for the research because it "interrogates contextually based meanings from an insider perspective as a means to generate new insights into our socially constructed realities and cultures" (Sutton-Brown, 2014: 170). Photovoice as a method that was created out of the tradition of empowerment education for critical consciousness, feminist theory and documentary photography and reflecting an action-oriented, participant-directed method (ibid.) makes it a useful methodology for postcolonial and reflective research on agency of PoM in Libya. The methodology of photo elicitation involves using photographic content to prompt conversations and discussions with research collaborators. While within photo elicitation methodology, content is usually chosen by the researcher, in the proposed research adding the methodology of photo voice, the decision on the content will be made by research collaborators. The research methodology encourages PoM research collaborators to narrate their perspectives without the key decisions of the research process being made by the (institutionalized) researcher beforehand. This working paper argues that the proposed methodology holds the possibility to move forward with the suggested paradigm change in Mediterranean migration scholarship.

4. Ethical considerations, challenges, and limitations

The proposed research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the experience of migration and agency of PoM in Libya. And yet, as critical feminist scholars such as Walia (2013) have shown, participatory research led by privileged researchers that are not involving research participants in the process of knowledge production, often do not result in social change. While PoM are often asked to tell their stories within migration research, the decision-making power of the research process often remains with the researcher (Clark-Kazak 2021). These ethical considerations regarding the research paradigm inform

the perspective of the working paper. Most importantly, ethical considerations in the proposed research cannot be seen as a list that gets ticked off at the beginning of the research process but rather is conceptualized as an ongoing process (ibid.).

Despite that, there are still ethical challenges and dilemma that need to be addressed. Research with participants in context of forced or voluntary migration⁵ can also cause harm especially because of precarious legal status, unequal power relations and the criminalization of migration (Clark-Kazak 2017). Reflecting on this, the research should work with a guideline provided by the Canadian Council for Refugees, York University's Centre for Refugee Studies and the Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies on ethical considerations when conducting research collaborating with people in situations of forced migration. Hence, the guiding principles will be equity, right to self-determination, competence, and partnership (ibid.: 12). The research should aim not to simplify and abstract the participants voices to make them amendable to a specific purpose or agenda, however it is important to reflect the positionality of the researcher as a person in a position of power regarding the collaborators.

Ethical considerations conceptualized in this way must reflect on aspects such as consent, privacy, harm reduction and calls for an awareness of an adaption to different migration realities (Clark-Kazak 2021). Therefore, it is important for researcher to be aware of risks that are connected to residency, migration status, or legal citizenship of research participants (ibid.). Concretely, in the proposed case study on the Libyan context, there is a myriad of risks that need to be taken into consideration regarding the safety of research collaborators as well as the institutionalized researcher. As outlined above, most relevant places where research with PoM in Libya could be of relevance, are hard to reach for researchers and are characterized through a high level of violence, possibly putting PoM at risk of more violence if they participate in research on their situation. Therefore, the working paper proposes starting the research process with PoM that have successfully arrived in Europe through the Libyan-Italian route. Some members of the organization *Refugees in Libya* have successfully made the Central Mediterranean crossing and through

⁵ As discussed above, the working paper does not follow rigid distinctions between forced and voluntary migration. So, while the guideline used as ethical guidelines focuses on forced migration, this working paper argues that profound ethical guidelines are important in any context when studying human mobility.

contacts of the institutionalized research from being active in the civil search and rescue fleet, contacts can be used to reach out to possible collaborators. From there onwards, a snowball-method will be used.

Additionally, public discourse on migration is highly politicized and research findings can be misused for specific political agendas, taken out of context and/or used to argue for xenophobic, racist, or anti-immigrant policies (ibid.). Also, chosen sampling methodologies have ethical implications on who is and isn't asked to participate in the research and must be chosen carefully.

As mentioned in the research design, the study is explorative and contextual, meaning that it is highly connected to the Libyan context. This means that it has a geographically and otherwise limited scope. It is important to underline that members that would participate in the research do not represent all PoM in Libya and can be assumed that there are also power relations at play regarding who gets to participate in the research in the first place. Additionally, while it is argued that the collaborative research methodology is useful and allows to gain new insights on PoM's agency, is also comes with admissions regarding the number of people that can participate due to the complexity of the research process itself. Besides, while the researcher aims to reflect on power dynamics and the positionality vis-à-vis the research collaborators, there is still a significant amount of power imbalance that has implications on the research. To summarize, it is argued that while there is a myriad of limitations, the research will still be able to provide valuable insights and perspectives from below.

5. Concluding remarks

The aim of this working paper was to offer a conceptualization of political agency and acts of citizenship of PoM that starts from below. Therefore, it used AoM and CCS approaches to offer perspectives on initiatives by PoM that recognize them as active agents able to challenge the societal status quo and dominant discourses. To achieve this lens in the prospective research, a collaborative research project has been designed. This can be seen as an invitation to Mediterranean migration scholars to reflect on research agendas, paradigms, and methodologies. The main idea is to put forth a way of conducting research that will enable the researcher together with the collaborators to generate transformative

knowledge that puts PoM's perspectives in focus to answer the proposed research questions. Ultimately the research therefore aims to contribute to discursive transformations that move away from dominant narratives about mobility to and through Libya, and beyond. The transformative knowledge that would be generated also aims to shed light on the situation of PoM in Libya in order to hold European as well as Libyan authorities accountable for human rights violations that are taking place in their name, through their cooperation or without their efforts to effectively stop it. The proposed way of conducting research therefore aims to contribute to social and political transformations by starting from what is argued is the most important perspective on mobility: the perspective of PoM themselves.

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