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Epistemic Decolonization of Migration: Digital Witnessing of Crisis and Borders in *For Sama*

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Abstract This chapter analyses how digital witnessing of migration in documentary auto-ethnography contributes towards epistemic decolonization. I focus on *For Sama* (Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019) as a case study, a letter-film that memorializes key events in al-Kateab's everyday life during the Syrian Civil War that shaped her decision to migrate to Europe. By considering the relation between documentary, citizen media, and decoloniality, I argue that digital witnessing in *For Sama* provides affective access to migration motivations that challenges their reductionist categorization and pluralizes audience understanding of 'crisis' and 'borders'.

Keywords Migrant voices. Decoloniality of knowledge. Documentary auto-ethnography. Crisis ordinariness. Borderscape.

Summary 1 Digital Inclusion of Migrant Voices. – 2 Towards Decoloniality of Knowledge. – 3 Auto-ethnography of War and Migration. – 4 Navigating Borderscapes of Migration. – 5 Digital Witnessing and Epistolarity. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Digital Inclusion of Migrant Voices

Images of border-crossing, both of Europe's terrestrial and maritime borders, regularly feature in digital representation of migration. Since the discourse of 'crisis' became central to the issue of migration to Europe, external European borders became sites of anxiety over their ability to regulate migrant movement, which has resulted in an ongoing debate on how securitization of borders should be enacted (Lynes et al. 2020). The so-called 'migration crisis', from a

Eurocentric point of view, can be understood as a crisis of migration management and border control. Such a construal of the crisis of European borders, which I will refer to as the border-crisis discourse, reinforces two contentious ideas. The first is that the ‘crisis’ at stake is an exceptional situation that disturbs an otherwise stable state of events, the danger of which requires an emergency response (New Keywords Collective 2016). The second pertains to an understanding of ‘borders’ as strictly spatial entities, which function to protect Europe from illegalized border-crossings (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). Digital mediations of the border-crisis discourse, as well as of other migration-related discourses, have rendered migrants hyper visible to European publics. Additionally, professional media outlets commonly remediate digital testimonies of migrants turned citizen journalists in relaying information to European audiences.

Considering the hypervisibility of migrants and the centrality of their testimonies in digital media, it is worth turning to the question of migrant inclusion in the production of knowledge of migration, in particular in relation to the digital witnessing of conflict. Digital witnessing has been defined by Lillie Chouliaraki (2015, 1363) as the use of mobile media, including the practice of recording, uploading, and sharing, to incite “moral engagement with distant suffering”. When it comes to the inclusion of migrant voices in the European mediascape, it has been argued that both institutional and grassroots initiatives implement a conditionality in the migrants’ right to speak instead of enabling them “to set the parameters of the conversation” (Georgiou 2018, 54). Moreover, digital witnessing in news media is commonly based on the re-contextualization of migrant testimonies as events worthy of European attention, thereby engaging in selective humanization that reproduces “global hierarchies of place and human life” (Chouliaraki 2015, 1375). An example of this is how the border-crisis discourse represents illegalized border-crossing as a crisis-event worthy of concerns over the protection of national borders, thereby creating a hierarchy between migrants’ lives and those of European citizens.

Forms of digital witnessing of migration that are based on conditional inclusion of migrant voices and misrecognition of migrants’ historicity partake in the logic of coloniality of migration by reinforcing coloniality of knowledge, which are together invested in regulating knowledge production in a manner that perpetuates hierarchies of difference in Europe (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Mignolo 2018). Coloniality is in this regard understood as an investment in the creation of hierarchies of difference used to justify exploitation and dehumanization of certain peoples in post-colonial contexts. Decoloniality, in contrast,

[R]efers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and

that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world. (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 10)

In this chapter, I am interested in how citizen media can avoid the potential pitfalls of the above-discussed instances of digital media, and how they can thereby delink from coloniality. How do citizen media that deal with the position of (prospective) migrants narrate the experience of crisis and borders? What forms of digital witnessing of migration do they afford? How do they advance epistemic decolonization of migration in digital media? In addressing these questions, this chapter contributes to an understanding of the relationship between coloniality, migration and citizen media in post-colonial Europe, and how cinematic practices can contribute towards decoloniality of migration. I thereby also join the discussion pursued by Andrea Segre's contribution to this volume on how cinema can intervene in migration discourses and policies.

As the recurring focus of the border-crisis discourse has been on migrants who flee the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), I focus on *For Sama* (2019) as a case study, a documentary auto-ethnography directed by Waad al-Kateab in collaboration with Edward Watts. The documentary, entirely shot and narrated by Waad, memorializes key events in hers, her partner Hamza's, and their daughter Sama's everyday life during the siege of Aleppo in 2016. In this chapter, I address the digital witnessing of war and migration in *For Sama* and its potential contribution to epistemic decolonization of migration. First, I elaborate on the relationship between witnessing, citizen media, cinema, and decoloniality. Second, I discuss how *For Sama* shifts the discussion from exceptional crises of migration in Europe towards crisis of ordinary life (Berlant 2011) as it is lived by those who contemplate migration, as well as from external territorial European borders to borderscapes (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) that include internal and temporal borders that shape migrant subjectivities. Moreover, I discuss the relation between the affective dimension of digital witnessing afforded by *For Sama*'s epistolary format, which marks spectatorship both in terms of intimacy and distance, and its contribution towards epistemic decolonization of migration. I argue that *For Sama* affords heterogeneity of knowledge of migration through digital witnessing that pluralizes our understanding of 'crisis' and 'borders', as well as challenges reductionist categorizations of migration motivations.

2 Towards Decoloniality of Knowledge

In examining the representation of migrant voices in digital Europe, Myria Georgiou (2018) differentiates between their inclusion in institutional and grassroots initiatives. She finds that institutional initiatives regulate the inclusion of migrant voices to further institutional aims and fit the interests and imaginaries of European audiences, whereby migrants are represented as non-political subjects worthy of humanitarian help. Grassroots initiatives, on the other hand, try to advance a politics of solidarity and equality. They feature migrants who hold certain symbolic power in European public spaces and represent them as political agents who have rights or demand rights. Both types of initiative, as Georgiou (2018) argues, are subject to symbolic power and reinforce certain aspects of 'symbolic bordering' (Chouliaraki 2017), a form of sovereign power that operates through the mediated public sphere with the intention to regulate the norms of humanity, recognition, and voice. Symbolic bordering can be regarded as co-constitutive of the European border regime, due to their shared aim of regulating migrant inclusion into European public spheres. The border-crisis discourse, for example, enacts symbolic bordering by defining humanity in Eurocentric terms and thereby misrecognizes what is at stake in migrants' voices, which results in a lack of understanding of their historicity. Participatory digital media perpetuate symbolic bordering by implementing a conditionality in the migrants' right to speak, and in this way regulate forms of digital witnessing of migration (Georgiou 2018).

The field of media witnessing can be approached as consisting of 'eyewitnesses', 'mediators', and 'audience' (Ashuri, Pinchevski 2009). The eyewitnesses are in the direct proximity to the event, mediators enable the media production of the event at stake, and audiences are engaged by mediated perspectives in diverse ways. Such an account of witnessing highlights its political dimension by presenting it as a site of struggle instead of privilege, in which a witness must obtain agency, attain voice, and compel audiences to take notice. Given the intertwining of professional and citizen journalism in news media reporting, and the multiplicity of actors who are filming, the field of witnessing becomes a site of struggle where different actors "vie for visibility" (Chouliaraki 2015, 1372). This is noticeable when it comes to the remediation of migrant testimonies in digital media. Namely, in analysing different forms of digital witnessing in conflict zones that rely on the remediation of digital testimonies, including those of (prospective) migrants, Chouliaraki (2015) finds them to be primarily dedicated to managing doubts over authenticity of the image by re-contextualizing the footage as an event worthy of European attention. Namely, digital news media attempt to establish authenticity by aligning the emotional potential of the

mediated event with Western sensibilities, thereby making it morally relevant for Western publics.

Forms of digital witnessing that normalize categorization, classification, and illegalization of migration, as well misappropriate, marginalize, and misrecognize migrant voices can be regarded as practices that reinforce coloniality of knowledge. For example, border-crisis discourse and its focus on migration management have placed the opposition between ‘forced’ or political and ‘voluntary’ or economic migration under a magnifying glass. However, instead of being opposed to each other, so-called political and economic motivations for migration should rather be perceived as connected, which is known as the ‘asylum-migration nexus’ (Castles 2006). Namely, the belief that political and economic reasons for migration are easily separable ignores the diverse contexts in which migration decisions are made. Such strict analytical and binary categorization overlooks many motivations to migrate and poses illegalization as a continuous threat (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). In turn, the processes of categorization, classification, and illegalization of migrants make migration and population governable (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014). Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018) conceptualizes the governing logic underlying these processes as one of ‘coloniality of migration’, which works to reinforce hierarchies of difference at the basis of Europe’s violent, and often deadly, bordering techniques. A crucial aspect of this logic is coloniality of knowledge: a subject/object relation, whereby only European cultures can have ‘subjects’ as bearers of knowledge, while other cultures, positioned as inferior to European cultures, can only be ‘objects’ of knowledge (Quijano 2007). The position of a ‘subject’, then, can be understood as “a field of struggle and a site that must be controlled and dominated” so as to ensure “the coherence of a given worldview” (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 19), which echoes the conceptualization of witnessing as a site of political struggle.

When migrants are separated from the mediation process in the field of media witnessing, they cannot partake in the process of creating collective meanings about their own experiences and the issues that directly concern them, which results in their epistemic marginalization in Europe and a lack of hermeneutical resources regarding experiences of migration. The hermeneutical gap created by symbolic borders can be repaired through epistemic decolonization of knowledge of migration, which is an ongoing process through which the subject/object relation of knowledge production is liberated, in turn allowing for the production of heterogeneity of knowledge of migration (Quijano 2007). ‘Delinking’ from hegemonic forms of knowledge can change the terms of the conversation about migration to Europe and open the possibility of decolonial subjectivity (Mignolo 2018). Documentary auto-ethnography partakes in the process of epistemic decolonization by enabling eyewitnesses to contribute

to the production of knowledge of migration by becoming mediators of their own testimonies, creating and narrativizing visual registers of migration experiences, and by setting their own terms of conversation about it. Turning towards migrants' mediated knowledge acknowledges them as contributors to hermeneutical resources that shape European publics and brings to the fore their own manner of self-narration, as opposed to the social type imposed on them by normative hermeneutical resources (Hänel 2021).

Such a relationship between citizen media, cinema, and decoloniality, has already been theorized by Sandra Ponzanesi (2016). As she writes, postcolonial cinemas, when acting as a "platform for subaltern marginalities", can afford migrants participation in the shaping of public and political life: the use of media by members of marginalized communities "to critique and contest social structures and shape political realities" is where postcolonial cinemas and citizen media intersect (Ponzanesi 2016, 43). Importantly, cinema's particular contribution to decoloniality lies in its aesthetic ability to provide "alternative visual registers" (44). The following section will thus unpack how *For Sama* contributes towards epistemic decolonization and the shaping of postcolonial publics via cinematic means.

In *For Sama*, Waad traces hers and Hamza's commitment to their respective parts in the revolution as a citizen journalist and a doctor despite the imminent danger to their lives, the starting of their shared family life and birth of their daughter Sama, as well as how they grapple with the moral dilemma of whether to stay in Aleppo or leave and migrate to the United Kingdom. By utilizing voice-over narration, Waad creates an audio-visual letter for Sama that tries to explain the choices her parents made. Prior to making the film, Waad was employed as citizen journalist for Channel 4, a British public service television network, where her footage featured in a program titled *Inside Aleppo*. The program offered reports about daily life in besieged Aleppo, which were remediated to fit an impersonal perspective narrated by a non-diegetic voice-over that mainly expressed humanitarian concerns for victims of war. *For Sama*, on the other hand, while utilizing some of the same footage that featured in *Inside Aleppo*, tells a personal story from Waad's perspective. The documentary thereby exceeds citizen journalism and takes the form of auto-ethnography about the reality of Syrian citizens seeking safety in Europe, which makes it an instance of citizen media (Baker, Blaagaard 2016).¹

¹ Channel 4 produced the film, alongside other international public broadcasters. This entails that *For Sama* can simultaneously afford the expression of the al-Kateab's voice on her own terms and fulfill certain institutional aims of the funding organizations or other collaborators involved in the project.

3 Auto-ethnography of War and Migration

‘Crisis’ rhetoric often presents border-crossings as emergency situations in relation to migration management and border control. New Keywords Collective (2016) has argued against seeing illegalized migration movement as resulting in exceptional crises at European borders by pointing out that, considering a border regime that forecloses mobility for many, large-scale illegalized migration to Europe is a predictable and inevitable event. They criticize the exceptionality that the term ‘crisis’ casts on migration, which they oppose to the temporal durability of the issue that reveals the border regime itself as being in permanent crisis. Instead of targeting the long-existing issues of the European border regime, in particular the violence and death intrinsic to its exclusionary practices, the ‘crisis’ rhetoric is commonly used for perpetuating the very conditions that have created the emergency situations at stake. In this way, not only is the current European border regime structured around the repression of migration, but the continuous equation of ‘crisis’ with migration further legitimizes and reinforces such a regime.

As many migration theorists have already argued, this state of affairs points towards a crisis of state power over transnational human mobility, which, despite the regulative efforts of the European border regime, remains incorrigible and continues to contest Europe’s bordering practices (De Genova 2017). It also points towards the multiplicity of crises that those practices enact for migrants, including mistreatment, marginalization, and death, which the Eurocentric focus on migration management tends to normalize (Lynes et al. 2020). Of importance to this chapter is how the discourse of exceptional crises of border-crossing distracts from the regime of structural and ongoing disruptions to everyday life, or ‘crisis ordinariness’ (Berlant 2011), which may prompt migration in the first place. Lauren Berlant’s theorization of the relationship between ordinary life and experiences of crisis comes from an understanding that

[C]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness, but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming. (Berlant 2011, 10)

It is in this manner that I will approach *For Sama*’s insights into how ordinary lives are shaped by crises, and how people develop survival tactics to find ways to continue living in such situations.

The documentary’s narration of border-crossing reveals how the family’s everyday life is shaped by an ongoing crisis induced by the civil war. The crisis ordinariness in which they live has nothing to do with exceptional disturbances to an otherwise stable state of events, but rather with an experience of the ‘impasse’, a stretch of the his-

torical present that does not have a clear temporal genre of its own but rather points to the struggle to adjust to the everyday life shaped by structural and ongoing crises (Berlant 2011). It as an experience of the present as a

[M]iddle without boundaries, edges, shape, [...] where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurance of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. (Berlant 2011, 200)

Affectively, the impasse involves the experiences of being suspended in time, stuck, unable to progress towards a future, yet continuously trying to adapt to the uncertainties of everyday life. Let us take a closer look at how the film reveals the impasse as experienced amid ongoing violence and death.

When the protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad in early 2011 were met with repression and censorship, many citizens started documenting how the uprising escalated into a civil war, with the hope of providing audio-visual evidence for the violence regime forces were enacting against citizens (Della Ratta 2018). Among them was Waad, who also took on the role of a citizen journalist. As she explains in the film: “The regime denied protests were happening. Filming on mobile phones was the only way to show the world we were fighting for our freedom”. Her personal archive from this period includes images of mass protests, showing how citizens organized themselves to demonstrate against the regime, as well as how pro-regime security forces reacted with violence against the protesters.

One of the earliest moments included in the film that shows the terror faced by Syrian citizens occurs in January of 2013. In the scene, Waad arrives at the city square, where bodies of deceased civilians are displayed after being taken out of a river, where they were initially drowned. With her camera in hand, she searches for those who were handcuffed, visibly tortured, and executed with a bullet to the head, wanting to document the massacre. Waad is not only interested in relaying such information, but also the experience of living in and with violence. As she comes closer to the deceased civilians, she attends to their mutilated bodies, offering an uncensored and unregulated account of the massacre.

While this massacre stands out as a traumatic event in Waad’s recounting of the civil war, it is unfortunately the first one of many to come. Waad and Hamza spend most of their time in an improvised hospital set up to help the victims of war, thereby becoming eyewitnesses to the outcomes of multiple air strikes, cluster bombs, tank shelling and chlorine gas attacks in Eastern Aleppo. Multiple scenes in the documentary reveal the extent to which everyday life in Aleppo has been disrupted. For example, after one of the air strikes in Sep-

tember 2016, two young boys enter the hospital with a lifeless body of their brother, Mohammad, and are soon followed by their mother who is in search of her children. Waad's camera attends to the boy's lifeless body, to the shock and grief of his brothers, and the protective embrace of his mother as she envelops his body in a motherly caring gesture. In staying with the one who has died and with those who grieve his death, *For Sama* shows the terror of living in Aleppo that seems impossible to evade.

As traumatic events become nearly everyday occurrences, the repetitive immersion in violence and suffering reveals the experience of an ongoing crisis as one of the impasse, in which the present is suspended due to the overwhelming impact of the trauma. Following Berlant (2011), we can understand the crisis ordinariness portrayed in *For Sama* as incited by traumatic events in which one encounters violence and death. Berlant (2011, 81) argues against a common understanding of traumatic events as resulting in the detachment of a subject from the historical moment, and instead proposes to conceive of the affective structure of trauma as involving a "sense of being saturated by it in the present", "a sense of being frozen out of the future (now defined by the past)", and "because ordinary life does go on, a sense of the present that makes no sense with the rest of it". The impasse experienced amidst such a crisis ordinariness is the impasse "when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust" (200). Instead of perceiving the traumatic events as detached from the ordinary, one must rather pay attention to how they become diffused through the ordinary, which *For Sama* as a testimony of living amid violence and death enables.

At the centre of Waad's personal experience is the inability to conceive of a future in Aleppo, as the hopes for the revolution are continuously shattered by the regime's oppression. With her camera, she traces the adjustments her family makes to living in an ongoing crisis, her struggle to cope with the impasse, and the suspension of their life in a civil war with no end in sight. By revealing how crisis ordinariness is shaped by traumatic events that diffuse through everyday life, *For Sama* offers insight into the affective and temporal dimensions of the lived experiences of crisis, which in turn not only challenges the Eurocentric rhetoric of 'migration-crisis' but pluralizes our understanding of 'crisis' in relation to migration. In turn, crisis is revealed as a recurring event diffused through the ordinary that incites contemplations of border-crossing, instead of as an exceptional disturbance to the European border regime.

4 Navigating Borderscapes of Migration

In this section, I move towards the spatial and temporal bordering practices that underlie the above-discussed experiences of the *impasse*. Let us first critically interrogate the understanding of ‘borders’ in relation to crisis-management that is reinforced by the border-crisis discourse. Of relevance here is the personification of crisis as a ‘disease’ carried by the migrant:

The very terms ‘migrant crisis’ and ‘refugee crisis’ tend to personalize ‘crisis’ and relocate it in the body and person of the figurative migrant/refugee, as if s/he is the carrier of a disease called ‘crisis’, and thus carries the contagion of ‘crisis’ wherever s/he may go. (New Keywords Collective 2016, 20)

Crisis-as-disease discourse enacts victimhood as a structure of communication (Chouliaraki 2021) by personifying Europe into a victim of such a ‘disease’. The focus of these anxieties are migratory border-crossings, particularly those of nation states, which are perceived as protective barriers to the entry of the ‘disease.’

The understanding of nation-state borders as sites where the security of citizens and citizenship against illegalized migrants supposedly takes place, is reinforced through spectacles of law enforcement. De Genova (2013, 1181) calls these ‘border spectacles’, which are spectacles of “enforcement at ‘the’ border, whereby migrant ‘illegality’ is rendered spectacularly visible”. A common enactment of a border spectacle includes images which depict the patrolling and policing of geographical borders, as well as detentions, raids, and deportations. Such images work to render ‘illegality’ visible, and to enact and perform borders as sites where ‘illegal’ migrants are excluded. Importantly, this performativity of border spectacles is effective in naturalizing borders as the nation states’ physical frontiers and spaces for regulation of migration through exclusion. Rosaria Ruffini’s contribution to this volume also taps into the performative character of the border by attending to the creative practices that subvert that space of performativity into one of interaction and solidarity.

Moreover, the equation of borders with those of nation states undermines the multiplicity and heterogeneity of borders that shape European spaces and subjectivities, not only those of illegalized migrants but also of legally recognized citizens. In response, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) propose the term ‘borderscape’ as one that can account for a dynamic understanding of the border. Rather than being static territorial lines, borderscapes comprise of a multiplicity of spatial and temporal borders. The spatiality of the borderscape includes external borders, which delineate a nation-state, as well as internal borders, which refer to unofficially instat-

ed borders within nation states that work to differentiate between the local population. Internal borders usually manifest in the form of neighbourhoods that appear as spatially segregated from the rest of the city's population. This process of 'internal exclusion' results in a creation of a local population that is neither inside nor outside of society (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). The focus on the temporality of the borderscape is productive in illuminating how time can be experienced as bordered, as opposed to linear, by migrants and citizens alike. While there are many manifestations of temporal borders, what they have in common are

[E]xperiences of passing through and living in borderscapes where the compression, elongation, and partitioning of time exerts effects of control, filtering, and selectivity. (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013, 132)

For example, time spent in detention centres can be perceived as temporal holding, and those with temporary visas and residence permits can measure time in relation to the temporal validity of their documents.

For Waad, Hamza, and Sama, the internal borders within Syria have multiplied during the civil war as the battle for Aleppo progressed. Two internal borders have significant impact on their lives: one is the border of Eastern Aleppo, held by the rebel forces, which separates it from the regime-governed territories of Aleppo; the second one is the border between the hospital, where they spend most of their time, and the world outside it. The potential border-crossing of Syria's national borders, and eventually across European borders, are ideas that are mediated in their minds for a long time as they negotiate the internal borders of their everyday movements. In this sense, as contemplations of migration, these borders proliferate into temporal borders, representing potential moments in time when the borders within Syria could close in on them and migration could emerge as the only possible survival method. To see border-crossing as a temporal border denotes its perceived power to enact temporal differentiation into their lives: the lives before the border-crossing as the fight for the revolution, and the life afterwards as an acknowledgment that the uprising has been suppressed, at least temporarily. Nonetheless, despite these multiple borders, the digital witnessing enabled by Waad's citizen journalism continuously transgress the spatial and temporal divide between her and Europe by connecting her with international audiences. The borderscapes of migration, in Waad's case, should be seen as permeated by the labour she performs through the collaboration with Channel 4, which partially transforms her into a virtual migrant (Aneesh 2006).

Many of the adjustments to living in the impasse of war appear as survival tactics enacted with the hope to make the ordinary life possible again. Such adjustments to crisis ordinariness offer tempo-

rary moments of feeling unstuck, with a sense that a future in Syria might be possible. With the daily attacks on civilians by the regime and its allies, which also target hospitals, the frontier that the hospital space represents, and which has brought some sense of security to Waad's family, begins to be disturbed. Crossing the border of the hospital into the outside world becomes a transgression of a border that separates a situation of crisis from one of normalcy, a manner of believing that everyday life can continue despite the terror: "I just need to see people alive. To try to live a normal life is to stand against the regime". The commitment and persistence to live a normal life - a demand for normalcy - is what she finds revolutionary in itself. Waad's camera films how everyday life unfolds on the streets of Aleppo: some people are playing chess, others are painting a building with colourful shades, while the children are bathing in bomb craters and playing in the ruins of a bus hit by a cluster bomb.

The strongest persistence against the impasse has been Waad's and Hamza's decision to start a family. Surrounded by a small group of friends in an apartment where windows are covered with sandbags for protection, a small wedding ceremony is performed. In elegant wedding clothes, they walk hand in hand, smiling and laughing, as Waad narrates: "The sound of our songs was louder than the bombs falling outside". Soon after, she announces her pregnancy. In a scene in which she gives birth to Sama, we see her overwhelmed by emotions: "When I saw you... I remembered all we had suffered and all the people we lost. Yet you gave me hope to start anew". Past, present, and future are clearly delineated in this scene, with Sama's birth differentiating the past, now marked by loss, from the future, which could hold a different life.

Despite their efforts against the multiplication of borders in their lives, the regime forces are making steady progress in expanding their control over Eastern Aleppo. With hospitals as the main target, it is not long until Hamza's hospital is the last one still operating, with hundreds of wounded people being brought in daily. Waad's camera focuses on two parents who are carrying the body of their just deceased child. Like many other scenes filmed inside the hospital, Waad is drawn towards families destroyed by the war, towards parents, especially mothers, and their children. The mother whom she films in this scene, which is also the last such scene in the film, is in shock, crying loudly over the death of her child who was killed in an airstrike as they tried to leave the besieged district. Despite having witnessed similar traumatic events before, this one feels different. "I am not sure I can handle it", says Waad. With her camera, she moves around the hospital rooms full of bodies of dead children and lingers on the puddles of blood that surround her. In that moment, the deaths she witnessed and the losses she suffered become overwhelming: "Even when I close my eyes, I see the colour red. Blood

everywhere. On walls, floors, our clothes. Sometimes we cry blood". The overwhelming impact of death as a recurring event in her everyday life forces Waad to choose migration as a survival tactic out of the increasingly oppressive crisis ordinariness. Namely, as the regime forces come to surround the hospital, the paths she can take to save Sama have narrowed to two by now. They could leave her, as Sama's chances for survival might be higher if the regime forces do not know who her parents are. Or, as the regime and its allies have promised, they could be evacuated from Aleppo, and their lives will be spared. Under such circumstances, they decide to accept this alternative.

With this, they cross the temporal border that the decision to migrate represented. Border-crossing carries distinct kinds of weight for each migrant. For Waad and Hamza, leaving Aleppo entails leaving the roles they performed in the revolution. This does not mean they will not enact their revolutionary ideas elsewhere, but it means, at least, a temporary defeat, after having tried for years to resist the regime's oppression in Syria. From this perspective, *For Sama* can be understood as narrating the larger borderscape of the family's migration decision. Even though the crossing of national borders does not feature in *For Sama*, the film nonetheless represents the family's navigation of this borderscape's internal and temporal borders and their lengthy process of contemplating border-crossing, first from Syria to Turkey, and then to Europe. Importantly, Waad's connection to Channel 4 as a citizen journalist has ensured a safe and legalized border-crossing to England, where they now reside. In this, *For Sama* offers insight into the affective experience of borders that shape migrant subjectivities and into the efforts against their proliferation, which in turn not only challenges the Eurocentric reiteration of borders as nation states' protective barriers but reveals a multiplicity of internal and temporal borders that migrants must navigate prior to border-crossing.

Moreover, as these insights are provided by witnessing everyday life through the director's perspective, it is worth briefly turning to the role of character engagement in epistemic decolonization. In the director's statement about *For Sama*, Waad reflects on the process of self-narrativization: "Waad the mother, Waad the activist, Waad the citizen journalist and Waad the director. All those people both embodied and led the story". The roles she identifies here as important for her life are the roles she embodied during her life in Aleppo, as well as the roles she had to negotiate and express in the process of telling her own story to reveal the complexity of her reality. While her family has undoubtedly been forcibly displaced, the migration motivations that informed their decision to leave Syria are multiple and cannot be characterized as either political or economic, which the logic of coloniality of migration imposes. Therefore, considering *For Sama's* access to crisis ordinariness permeated by spatial and tem-

poral borders, character engagement affords insights into the nexus of migration motivations, which in turn reveals the strict binary logic of migration categorization and classification in Europe as reinforcing coloniality of migration.

5 Digital Witnessing and Epistolarity

Crisis ordinariness and borderscapes of migration have been communicated in *For Sama* via an epistolary format, which has often been used among filmmakers reflecting on questions particular to migration (Naficy 2001). No matter the format of the epistle, be it a written letter, a phone call, or a video message, it necessarily involves intersubjective contact and communication, or at least the desire for one. Following Hamid Naficy's analysis of different epistolary formats in cinema, the one that emerges as relevant for the current analysis is a 'letter-film':

Unlike exilic film-letters that inscribe letters, telephones, and other epistolary media, as well as acts of writing and reading letters and conversing on the telephone, letter-films are themselves epistles that do not necessarily inscribe epistolary media or epistolary production or reception. (Naficy 2001, 141)

As *For Sama* takes the form of a letter to the director's daughter but does not involve epistolary production or reception within the film, it can best be described as a letter-film. Waad addresses the letter-film to Sama to make herself, and her decisions before and after having given birth, intelligible to her daughter.

For Sama utilizes epistolarity for self-exploration and self-narrativization as much as for intersubjective contact and communication. In the attempt to make oneself intelligible to an other, the creation of an epistle poses the relationship between the personal and the social as a question: a form of reciprocity is desired, but not guaranteed (Naficy 2001). Building on Naficy's theorization of the epistolary film as necessarily implying the desire for intersubjective contact and communication, Laura Rascaroli (2017, 147) stresses how distance "is at once emphasized and overcome by the intimate address". Both Naficy and Rascaroli highlight the desire for reciprocity as an essential aspect of the epistolary format, which inherently acknowledges the distance - temporal, spatial, or both - that exists between the one who is writing the letter and its intended receiver. While Waad's activism may have started from the need to provide visual evidence against regime's oppression, it transformed into the act of filming her everyday experiences, some of which are purely personal, such as her and Hamza's wedding, announcement of pregnancy, and the birth of

Sama. Presented in a letter-film, these recordings are recontextualized to memorialize events that have had, and will continue to have, impact on Sama, who is currently unaware of them. *For Sama*, therefore, attempts to bridge an anticipated temporal distance between Waad and Sama, as well as the spatial distance between England, where they both reside, and Syria, where the footage takes places.

As epistolary exchanges include acts of reaching out without a guaranteed return of the gesture, Rascaroli further reflects how

[L]etters always weave a fragile textuality, one dependent on the next epistle being written, reaching its addressee, and being read and understood; the whole text is perched on the continuation of a dialogue that is deeply contingent and subject to a range of material and emotional conditions. (Rascaroli 2017, 155)

Reciprocity is at the core of the film, yet it is sought from Sama as a diegetic character and not directly from the spectator: “Sama, will you remember Aleppo? Will you blame me for staying here? Or blame me for leaving now?” Reciprocity is thus directly desired from the one within the film’s diegesis, while the viewer is allowed access to the letter’s intimate address. The decision to invite digital witnessing through a fragile textuality expressive of care, protection, and companionship results in the transformation of the spectator into an intimate witness of everyday life.

In the field of witnessing of migration that is bounded by symbolic borders, it is important to observe that *For Sama* takes the form of narration that does not seek to explain or persuade but offers an opportunity to witness intimate spaces of everyday life, whereby the spectator is not directly addressed, but included in an address expressive of the desire for understanding and reciprocity. Digital witnessing in *For Sama* is thus primarily affective, rather than, for example, persuasive. The epistemic relation between the director’s mediated testimony and the spectator is marked both by distance and by a sense of intimacy and desired reciprocity. Such cinematic choices shape digital witnessing in *For Sama* as one that welcomes, and not imposes, a heterogeneity of knowledge of migration. As its content and mode of storytelling delink from hegemonic migration discourses, the documentary introduces decoloniality of migration as an option, and not an imperative. The ability to see certain discourses and perspectives as otherwise, as plausibly different instead of as essential, is what Walter Mignolo (2018) finds to be a necessary dimension of decoloniality. The cinematic engagement afforded by the film’s epistolary auto-ethnographic format can thus be approached as a crucial aesthetic aspect of the film’s contribution towards epistemic decolonization.

6 Conclusion

By focusing on *For Sama* as a case study, this chapter offered an analysis of how digital witnessing – the engagement with lived experiences of violence and death in conflict zones through mobile media – affords access to the affective experience of war and migration. My analysis revealed the digital witnessing of Waad’s personal footage in the form of auto-ethnography as characterized by the engagement with the crisis of ordinary life, survival tactics against living in the impasse, multiplicity of spatial and temporal borders, personal and political needs to memorialize everyday life, and the desire for understanding and reciprocity. In enabling Waad as an eyewitness in a conflict zone to access the process of mediation and address audiences on her own terms, I argued that *For Sama* contributes to the process of epistemic decolonization of migration. My analysis showed how cinematic means of documentary auto-ethnography invite engagement with the affective experiences of crisis-ordinariness and borderscapes of migration in a manner that invites heterogeneity of knowledge. In pluralizing audience understanding of ‘crisis’ and ‘borders’, and in contextualizing motivations to migrate beyond the binary of ‘political’ or ‘economic’ reasons, *For Sama* delinks from hegemonic migration discourses, and reveals a voice that, on its own terms, furthers epistemic decoloniality.

Waad utilized documentary auto-ethnography to provide an alternative visual register of how everyday life unfolds amid ongoing crises and proliferating borders, thereby raising awareness of both national (Syrian) and international politics. Additionally, her digital initiative *Action for Sama*, a campaign “to end the targeting of healthcare facilities in Syria”,² aims to stimulate direct political engagement. In the former, she claims her voice as a revolutionary in Syria seeking safety in Europe, hence expanding on the public hermeneutical resources regarding experiences of war and migration. With the latter, she utilizes the awareness raised by the film on these particular issues in the international circuits to stimulate clear political action. For example, in November 2021, Waad addressed the United Nations Council, where she criticized the inaction in holding the perpetrators of war crimes in Syria accountable. Waad al-Kateab therefore turns to a multiplicity of aesthetic, epistemic, and political manners of engaging European publics with a decolonial option.

² See <https://www.actionforsama.com/>.

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